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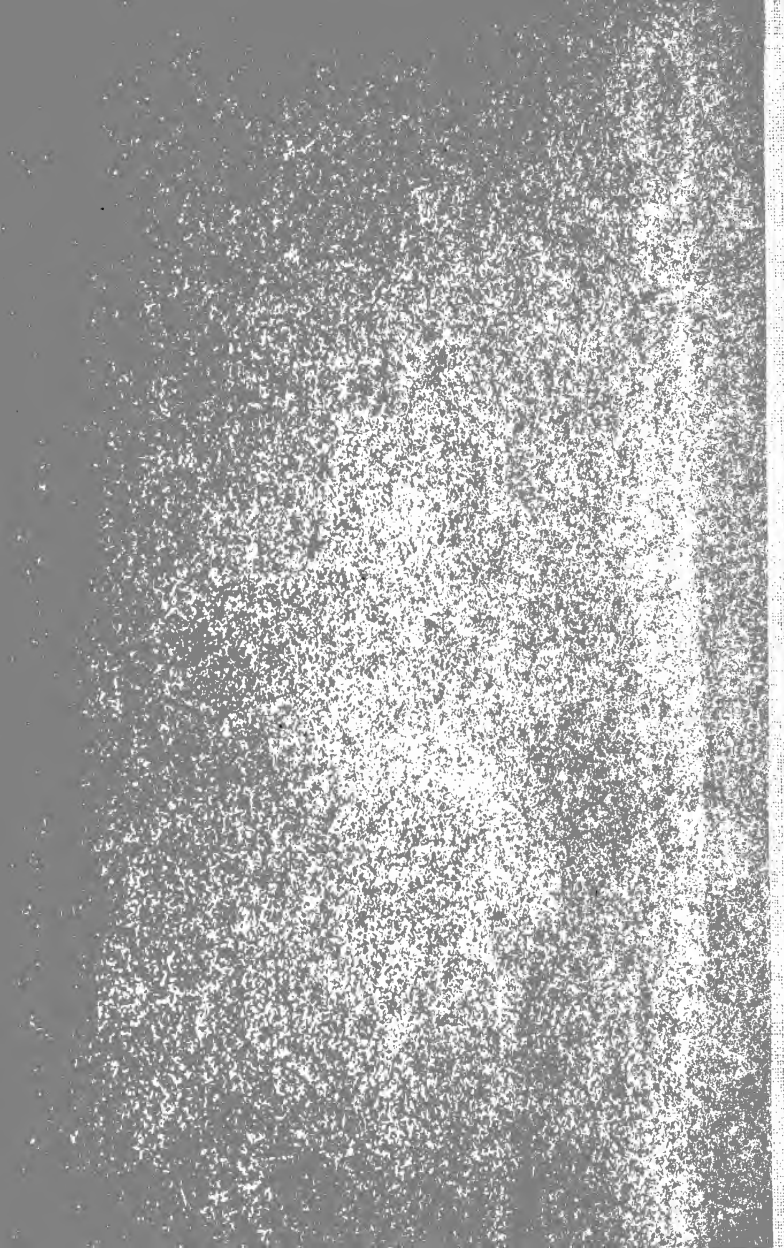


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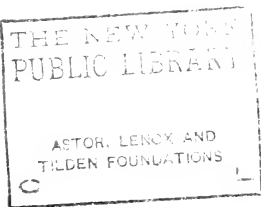
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"ALFRED HAS NEWS OF THE DANISH FLEET"



# ALFRED THE GREAT

BY

A. E. McKILLIAM M.A.

*With Frontispiece in Color and Eight  
Black-and-White Illustrations*



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## CHAPTER I: *The Boy Pilgrim*

**O**N a certain spring day, more than a thousand years ago, a stately procession set out from Winchester for the Sussex coast, on its way to Rome. First came a company of stalwart soldiers in glittering coats of mail, with spears in their hands and swords at their sides. Behind them rode many bishops and priests in gorgeous vestments, carrying holy banners. They were followed by a numerous body of royal attendants of all ranks, who surrounded a richly caparisoned horse, on the back of which was strapped a large open basket or pannier, draped with purple cloth. In this was seated a small blue-eyed, fair-haired boy, the chief in this great procession. On palfreys near him rode his nurse and other female attendants. Behind them came a troop of brown-robed monks, who had charge of the money required for the expenses of the journey. Last of all followed another brilliant company of nobles, soldiers, and attendants with mules and horses laden with provisions and fodder for the beasts.

The little prince, Alfred, who, at the age of five, thus set out on his first great adventure, was the fifth and youngest son of Ethelwulf, King of the West Saxons, and of his wife Osburgha, daughter of his cup-bearer Oslac, of the old kingly blood of the Jutes of Wight. Alfred was born in 849 at a royal villa near the old village of Wantage in Berkshire, where

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

at that time thick forests of oak and beech covered the hills and downs.

From boyhood Alfred was remarkable for his quick intelligence, and was more beautiful and graceful than his elder brothers. His generous and manly nature made him the pride of his parents and of the people of Wessex. Thus it came about that when only five years old he was chosen by King Ethelwulf in preference to his elder brothers for special honour.

It had long been the desire of the pious King Ethelwulf to make a pilgrimage to Rome, as was the custom of many kings and rulers of those times. He earnestly desired to offer his prayers at the shrines of the Holy Apostles, St Peter and St Paul, but the troubled state of his kingdom prevented him from setting out. So he determined to send ambassadors in advance to the Pope. With the royal embassy the King sent his youngest son Alfred, in order that the boy might receive the Pope's blessing.

Swithin, Bishop of Winchester, to whose special care Alfred was committed on this journey, was no other than the famous saint, who gave his name to St Swithin's Day—July 15. The story is that after his death he was buried, as he had requested, "where the feet of the passers-by might tread and the rain of heaven fall." Pious monks afterward tried to remove his body to

## *The Boy Pilgrim*

Winchester Cathedral, but rain fell continuously for forty days. This they believed to be a sign of the saint's displeasure, and they gave up the attempt to move his bones.

This story gave rise to the well-known saying:—

*“St Swithin’s Day, if thou dost rain,  
For forty days it will remain;  
St Swithin’s Day if thou be fair,  
For forty days t’will rain na’ mair.”*

It must have been with a sorrowful heart that Osburgha parted from her youngest son. Sad to say, Alfred was never to see his loving mother again, for she died before he returned to England.

So on the appointed day the solemn embassy set out on the southern road. From a port on the Sussex coast they crossed the Channel, in one of the long-oared galleys of those days, to the coast of Flanders. Thence on horseback they passed through sunny France, the territory of Charles the Bald, grandson of the mighty Charlemagne.

Along the old Roman roads the journey was easy and pleasant, but where the way lay through thick forests or across deep rivers and foaming cataracts, there were many dangers to be faced. Had the company been smaller or unarmed they would have been often in peril from the robbers, who in those days made their home in the deep forests or in the mountain caves.

# *The Story of Alfred the Great*

But to Alfred, who was so young that he did not understand those dangers or fear them, the journey seemed full of wonderful adventures. Many months were spent on the long and toilsome way. Sometimes the cavalcade would come to a great monastery or to the castle of some powerful nobleman, and there they would rest for a few days.

At last they reached the mighty chain of the Alps. Alfred could never forget his first vision of the great snow-capped peaks, gleaming radiant through the mists of morning.

The travellers crossed the mountains by one of the great passes. This was the hardest part of the journey, for the way lay over fields of snow, jagged rocks and dangerous ravines. Sometimes the only road was a small path winding along the edge of a precipice. But the Alps were safely crossed, and after descending the pleasant southern slopes, gay with flowers of all hues, the cavalcade entered Italy.

Through the fertile plain of Lombardy they journeyed, through Tuscany, the land of poetry and romance. At the many towns and villages through which they passed crowds of people would come out to gaze with curiosity at the English pilgrims and at the little fair-haired prince. But at last the long journey was over, and the solemn procession entered the gates of the Eternal City.

After resting for some days at one of the many

## *The Boy Pilgrim*

inns provided for pilgrims in Rome, Alfred was taken by Bishop Swithin to see the Pope, Leo IV. It was with much awe that Alfred and his guardian approached the stately palace on the Vatican Hill, for in those days the Pope was the most powerful sovereign in the world, and had authority over kings and princes in all lands. On being admitted to the Pope's presence they found, instead of the haughty prelate whom they had trembled to meet, a friendly, white-haired old man, who received the boy prince with much kindness. Pope Leo gave Alfred his blessing, and anointed him with holy oil, as was his custom when receiving princes who might one day be kings. He then wrote to King Ethelwulf a letter, which still exists, telling of the boy's safe arrival in Rome.

Though, according to some accounts, Alfred soon afterwards returned with Bishop Swithin to England, it is more probable that he remained in Rome until the arrival of his father more than a year later. It is certain that during the year Ethelwulf spent in Rome his youngest son was with him.

Many were the strange sights seen by Alfred during his stay in the Eternal City. Processions of bishops and priests gorgeously arrayed in many coloured vestments; curious figures of white and black-cowled monks and nuns, and ragged bare-footed friars hurrying through the streets; streams of pilgrims from all lands carrying with them sick folk, who hoped to

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

be healed at the shrine of the Apostle Peter. Troops of armed men waving banners and beating drums would also be seen entering or leaving the city, for in those days the cruel Saracens had invaded fair Italy, and Rome was in danger of attack.



## CHAPTER II: *A Thousand Years Ago*

MANY affairs of the kingdom had to be settled before King Ethelwulf could follow his youngest son to Rome.

England was not then one kingdom. When the Angles, Saxons and Jutes came from the shores of northern Europe and settled in Britain they had many kings or leaders, and each ruled a separate part of the country. Hundreds of years passed before the smaller kingdoms became united into one, and during that time the different kings were continually at war with each other. All the tribes who settled in Britain came to be known by the common name of "English." Because of their great love of freedom they preferred to live not in walled towns, but in small isolated villages, or in solitary farms built in clearings in the forests. So when they took possession of a town they burned its fine Roman buildings, and set up their own shabby mud or wattle dwellings outside the ruined walls.

By Alfred's time, however, the dwellings of the English had been much improved. Most of the houses were built of wood, which could be obtained in abundance from the great forests. But to us their homes would have seemed very uncomfortable. Their furniture was very simple. Only kings and rich people had chairs with backs, and their wooden

# *The Story of Alfred the Great*

beds were hard and without springs. Servants and slaves slept on heaps of rushes or straw spread on the floor. Fire-grates and chimneys were unknown, and the fire was usually lit in the middle of a room. The smoke had to find its way out as best it might through the door, or through a hole in the roof, left on purpose. Candles were used only by the well-to-do, and the poor either went to bed at dusk or contented themselves with the light afforded by their blazing wood fires. Being quite ignorant of greater luxury, the English of those days were very happy with the few comforts they had.

Much of their time was spent in the open air, and the boys and girls grew up strong and hardy, with long flowing flaxen hair, and blue eyes. Their ancestors on the plains round the Baltic Sea had been farmers, hunters and fishermen, so the English continued to follow these occupations for many years. Long before the coming of the English, Britain had been a famous grain-producing country, and farming continued to be a great industry. Our country could at that time produce more than sufficient corn to feed its inhabitants.

Bee-keeping was also a very favourite occupation, for sugar being unknown in those days, honey was the only substance used to sweeten food. Many people obtained a livelihood by keeping swine, for herds of these animals could be fed very cheaply on beech-nuts and acorns in the forests. So pork was

## *A Thousand Years Ago*

eaten more than any other kind of animal food. Eels, which abounded in the streams and pools, were also much used for food, especially in the monasteries during Lent and other fasts.

Even before Alfred's time the English had begun to engage in trade, and merchants from different parts of Europe came to do business in London. English ships went to the whale fishery in the North Sea, and vessels from Iceland and the farthest north of Scandinavia brought fruit and furs to the English markets.

Though there were few manufactures, English goldsmiths, silversmiths, and jewellers were already famous, and many beautiful specimens of their work may be seen in the British Museum. Spinning, weaving, and dyeing were also carried on, and in each household, rich or poor, all the cloth required for family use was spun by the women. Even kings' daughters learned to spin, and so common was the occupation among women that the term 'spinster' arose, and is still applied to unmarried women. The girls of the family also learned to sew, embroider, and cook, while the boys assisted their fathers in the fields or accompanied them to the chase.

That part of England south of the Thames where the West Saxons had settled was called Wessex, and in 827 Egbert of Wessex, the grandfather of Alfred, exercised power over all the other kings of England, and was acknowledged as their overlord or Bretwalda.

# *The Story of Alfred the Great*

Peace and security now seemed in store for England by the union of its kingdoms under one ruler. Yet, when ten years later old King Egbert lay dying, he was troubled by dark forebodings as to the future of his country. Ethelwulf, his only son and successor, had from youth preferred the company of priests to that of warriors, and was better fitted to enter a monastery than to rule a kingdom. Moreover, the dying King knew that fresh enemies were even then threatening England.

A famous race of sea-rovers, the Vikings, or "Men of the Creeks," had attacked all the countries of Western Europe, and were now hovering round our shores. These heathen Norsemen or Danes were cruel and heartless robbers. So much were they dreaded that a litany of the time has the prayer, "Deliver us, O Lord, from the fury of the Norsemen."

Their chief god was called Odin, whom they believed to be an old man with one eye; he had bartered the other for the gift of wisdom. Many old Danish legends tell of his skill in poetry and magic. He was said to receive in a wonderful palace called Valhalla, "the Hall of the Chosen Slain," the souls of those slain in battle. There they led a life of fighting and feasting such as they had desired on earth. Their belief in Valhalla made them intrepid warriors, fearless of death on the battle-field.

The ships of the pirates were long, open boats, some of which held as many as a hundred men. In



THE COMING OF THE NORSEMEN

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

these vessels, which were well fitted for speed, they were masters of the sea, and every river and inlet became a highway for their advance into the heart of the country. Arriving when least expected, they would land in some undefended part of the coast and ravage the country. Men were tortured and murdered; women were driven into slavery; and it is said that the savage robbers would sometimes toss babes from pike to pike in grim sport. Then, before it was possible to muster a force to oppose them, the pirates would make a dash for the sea and sail away with their plunder. Even when the English did succeed in overtaking them, it was little that men straight from the plough could do against a body of trained warriors.

The monasteries were the special prey of the Danes, not only because the gentle monks could not defend themselves, but because many people had given their wealth to the Church, so treasures such as gold and silver chalices, and books with jewelled bindings, were to be found there. Knowing this the Danes burned the monasteries, seized the treasures, and either slew the monks or drove them away homeless.

After the death of old King Egbert, Ethelwulf roused himself to take the field against the Danes, and fought them in many battles, yet during his reign their ravages increased. Thus it was that some of Prince Alfred's earliest memories were of



## *A Thousand Years Ago*

anxious faces, days of panic, and hurried departures of his father and elder brothers whenever news came of the arrival of Danes on the coast. Often as he listened to the tales told by his mother and nurse of the greed and cruelty of the Danes, he would long for the time when he should be old enough to ride forth with the army to fight the savage robbers, and drive them from his country.

Osburgha, the mother of Alfred, was a princess noble of heart as she was noble of birth. She it was who first told the boy wonderful tales of the heroes of past days and of their battles with men and monsters. From her he learned his lessons of valour, truth, and justice, without which no prince can be truly heroic.

Asser, a Welsh monk from the monastery of St David's, who lived at Alfred's court after he became King, wrote a life of his royal master, in which he tells the following story of Osburgha: One day she called her sons to her, and showed them a Saxon book of poetry.

"The one among you who can first say by heart the poems in this book shall have it," she said.

Delighted with the beautiful coloured lettering in the book, Alfred, the youngest boy, exclaimed; "Oh mother, wilt thou really give it to the one who first is able to repeat it to thee?"

Osburgha smiled joyfully and said:

"Yes, to him will I give it." Alfred took the book

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

to one of his teachers, and in due time brought it back to his mother and recited its contents. This book given by his mother remained among Alfred's most cherished possessions until the end of his life.

Whether this story be true or not, it was probably Osburgha who taught her youngest son to love books and poetry.

## CHAPTER III: *King Ethelwulf's Pilgrimage*

WITH the help of his eldest son Athelstan, Ethelwulf at length so far defeated the Danes, that for a season they troubled not the coasts of Wessex.

It was not until the spring of 855 that the King, who had been escorted through France by a guard provided by Charles the Bald, arrived in Rome. The little prince was probably taken by his attendants a day's journey to meet the King, and entered Rome with him. Great must have been the joy of Ethelwulf to find his favourite son safe and well, after so long a separation.

Ethelwulf found Rome in mourning, for Pope Leo IV was dead. The brave old warrior Pope had done much to defend the city from the Saracens, causing a fortified wall to be built round the church of St Peter and the Vatican Hill. This part of Rome is still called the Leonine city in his honour. To the poor he had ever been a generous friend, and the people of Rome wept for him.

Ethelwulf was received by the new Pope Benedict III. The costly gifts brought by the English King made him a welcome visitor at the Vatican palace. For the Pope he had brought a golden cross four pounds in weight, gold cups, and embroidered vestments.

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

A year was spent by King Ethelwulf in Rome, and during that time he bestowed many generous gifts on the Church and on the poor of the city. There had been in Rome for many years a school where Saxon priests might be educated, but it had been destroyed by fire. Ethelwulf caused it to be rebuilt at his own expense, and also promised to pay a yearly sum to supply oil for the lamps of St Peter's Church at Eastertide.

As Ethelwulf visited the many beautiful churches and holy shrines of the Eternal City he longed to remain there for the rest of his life, safe from the dangers that threatened his unhappy kingdom of Wessex.

Before this time two West Saxon kings, Caedwalla and Ina, had left their troubled kingdoms and retired to monasteries in Rome. The story of Caedwalla is thus beautifully and simply told by the monk Bede, in his history of the English Church:—

“Caedwalla, King of the West Saxons, quitted his throne for the sake of our Lord and His heavenly kingdom, and set out for Rome, being desirous to obtain the peculiar honour of being baptized in the Church of the Blessed Apostle. There he was baptized on Easter Day, 689, by Pope Sergius I, and being still in his white garments he fell sick, and departed this life to dwell for ever with the blessed in heaven.”

But Ethelwulf chose the braver part when duty called him to return to his kingdom, and he at last

## *King Ethelwulf's Pilgrimage*

set out on the homeward way with Alfred and his attendants. Once they crossed the Alps and journeyed through France to the court of Charles the Bald, which was then at Verberie on the Oise, near Compègne.

There Ethelwulf remained for three months. Though he was now more than sixty years old, he decided to marry Judith, the eldest daughter of Charles. Poor Judith, who was only fourteen, was better fitted to be a playmate to Alfred than to be his step-mother. What could have induced the King to marry so young a wife is not known. Probably he believed that the marriage would secure for him the help of Charles the Bald against the Danes. For the powerful King of the Franks would not be likely to suffer the humiliation of a kingdom over which his daughter reigned as Queen.

The wedding took place on October 1, 856, the ceremony being performed by Hincmar of Rheims, the most powerful churchman outside Rome. After the wedding the girl-wife was placed on a throne by the side of her grey-bearded husband, and crowned as Queen.

Soon after this Ethelwulf and his retinue set out for England, where in the meantime events important to the fortunes of the old King and his young bride were taking place.

## CHAPTER IV: *Prince Ethelbald's Revolt*

**D**URING Ethelwulf's long absence the people of Wessex, led by his son Ethelbald, had risen in revolt against his authority. His eldest son Athelstan, who had formerly ruled Kent but had retired to a monastery, was now dead, and Ethelbald his second son was heir to the throne. It is probable that soon after the King's departure on his pilgrimage, the bishops and nobles of Wessex had appointed Ethelbald regent for the whole kingdom.

Now Ethelbald was a more warlike prince than his father, and much better fitted to protect the kingdom against the Danes. Many of the people of Wessex declared that they desired nothing better than to have him for their King, without waiting for the death of the pious Ethelwulf. This pleased Ethelbald very much, for he was a bold and headstrong youth, who cared more for power and flattery than for anything in the world.

Among those who supported Ethelbald were Alstan, Bishop of Sherborne, and Eanwulf, Alderman of Somerset. Alstan had been the trusted friend and companion of old King Egbert, and was a better soldier than a bishop. On several occasions he had taken the field at the head of a body of troops and fought with great bravery against the Danes.

## *Prince Ethelbald's Revolt*

He honestly believed that Ethelbald was better fitted to rule Wessex than his unwarlike father.

The conspirators met secretly in Selwood forest on the borders of Devonshire and Somerset, and took an oath to support Ethelbald against his father when the latter returned to England. Some time after this meeting, news of Ethelwulf's marriage with Judith and of her coronation as Queen reached Wessex. These tidings served to rouse the people of Wessex against their King as nothing else could have done. About forty years before this time the West Saxons had taken a solemn oath that no woman should ever again receive the title of Queen of Wessex. The last to bear this title was Eadburga, daughter of the great King Offa of Mercia, and wife of Brihtric, who had preceded Egbert as King of Wessex.

Though Eadburga was very beautiful, she was heartless and cruel. Strange tales are told of her pride and insolence. It is said that whenever a noble of the court offended her, she asked her husband to put him to death. If Brihtric refused, she then gave the offender a cup of poison to drink. Now Brihtric had a dear friend called Worr, of whom Eadburga was jealous, and one day she made a poisoned cup for him. But Brihtric drank of the same cup as his friend, not knowing it was poisoned, so they died together.

Then all the people of Wessex rose in revolt against Queen Eadburga, and drove her from the land. She

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

fled across the seas and sought the protection of the great Emperor Charlemagne, who received her kindly, and made her abbess of a convent. But the quiet life among the gentle nuns could not change her nature. Soon her wicked deeds became so scandalous that Charlemagne was forced to dismiss her. She left the nunnery followed by one faithful slave, and wandered a beggar through the land. Many years later, travellers to the Italian city of Pavia told how they there saw Eadburga, a ragged, beggar woman, old and shrivelled, crying for bread in the streets.

The West Saxons never forgave the crimes of that wretched woman. Thenceforth the very name of queen was hateful to them. When they heard that Ethelwulf, not content with the folly of marrying a child-wife, had dared to place Judith on the throne by his side, and cause her to be proclaimed Queen, their indignation knew no bounds. The revolt which had before been secret now became open, and many of those who had stood aloof from Ethelbald, holding his conduct to be undutiful, now went over to his side. They declared that Ethelwulf well deserved to lose his kingdom, for he had shown contempt for the customs and feelings of his people.

Meantime Ethelwulf, Judith, and Alfred, with a long train of nobles, priests, and men-at-arms, were on their way to England. Their retinue was even larger and more magnificent than when they had set out, for Charles the Bald had sent a brilliant escort



## *Prince Ethelbald's Revolt*

of Frankish nobles to accompany his daughter Judith to England.

Alfred and Judith were in the highest spirits for, children as they were, no cares for the future as yet troubled them. To Judith, her first voyage across the Channel was full of new wonder and delight. She gazed with bright eyes on the white cliffs of Kent, and on the shores of that unknown country, now to be her home, toward which their vessel sped.

But as King Ethelwulf approached his native land he became silent and thoughtful. Though he had not yet heard of the rebellion against his authority, he knew that difficulties were in store for him before the West Saxons would consent to recognize Judith as Queen. He knew, too, that in the event of their refusing to do so, trouble would arise with Charles the Bald, who undoubtedly expected his daughter to be Queen of Wessex, and who would avenge any insult offered to her dignity. The thought of the responsibilities of kingship also weighed heavily on the King, and once more he wished that he had decided to renounce all, and remain in Rome for the rest of his life.

On the shores a large company had assembled to meet the royal travellers, for the people of Kent were still loyal to the old King. When Ethelwulf, with Judith and Alfred, stepped from the boat they were greeted with shouts of welcome. Banners waved, music played, and drums beat, until the

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

King, encouraged by the outburst of loyalty, hoped against hope that all might yet be well. But Bishop Swithin of Winchester, who had come to meet them with a few of the nobles of Wessex, greeted the King gravely, and on perceiving Judith said:

“A fitting welcome to the fair princess from the land of the Franks, wife of the King.”

Ethelwulf frowned with displeasure on hearing these words, for at once he perceived that Swithin had refrained from greeting Judith as Queen. The shouts of welcome continued, however, as the King rode westward with his companions. But as they approached the borders of Wessex, stern faces might be seen here and there in the crowd, and some gazed angrily on Ethelwulf and the young princess, muttering that they need not go far to find a king who would keep the law better than did this one.

It was not long before the King discovered the state of affairs in his kingdom. Though more than half the people declared their readiness to support him against Ethelbald, the others had become completely estranged from him, and had gone over to the side of the rebels. A few days after the King's return a meeting was held between the friends of the King and those who favoured Ethelbald. After much discussion the nobles decided that the people of Wessex had just cause for dissatisfaction, and that the power of Ethelbald was likely to increase as time went on, while that of the old King must diminish.

## *Prince Ethelbald's Revolt*

Two bishops, of whom Alstan was one, were sent to Ethelwulf to inform him that his people were fully determined to uphold the laws of the kingdom at all costs, and that only by much bloodshed would he be able to remain King of the West Saxons. Many of the King's faithful subjects were eager to fight for him, and vowed that they would not rest until they had driven the undutiful Ethelbald from the country. The King replied with deep sadness that in spite of the wrong done him he could not take up arms against his own son. With heathen enemies hovering round their shores a terrible civil war must be avoided, at whatever sacrifice.

Ethelwulf declared his willingness to divide the kingdom into two parts. The kingdom of Wessex, by far the most valuable, was to be given to Ethelbald, the eastern portion, consisting of Kent, Surrey, and Sussex, which formerly had been ruled by the eldest sons of the Kings of Wessex, was to remain in the hands of Ethelwulf. This arrangement suited both sides, for in Kent, queens were still admissible, and it was better that Judith should reign as Queen of Kent than accept an inferior position in Wessex.

So Ethelwulf, with Alfred and the princess, retired to Kent, and ruled that kingdom till his death. It is probable that his last years were rendered happier by this division than they would otherwise have been, for he retained all the dignity of a king and few of the responsibilities. He was free to spend

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much of his time in the churches offering up prayers for himself and those dear to him. He also occupied himself in planning generous gifts to churches and monasteries, in acts of charity to the poor, and in entertaining pilgrims.

The old King lived only about two years after his return from Rome. His son's treachery had been a severe blow from which he never fully recovered. He died on January 13, 858, and was buried at Winchester.

## CHAPTER V: *'The Locusts of the Baltic'*

**T**O prevent strife after his death, King Ethelwulf had left a will, decreeing that the kingdoms of Wessex and Kent should remain divided. Ethelbald was to continue ruling over Wessex, while Ethelbert, the next son, was to be king of Kent. If Ethelbald died childless, the third son, Ethelred, was to succeed him as king of Wessex, and after him, Alfred. By his will, Ethelwulf also provided "that one poor man out of every ten in the country, either native or foreigner, should be supplied with meat, drink and clothing by his successors, until the day of judgment, supposing, however, that the land should still be inhabited by men and cattle, and should not become deserted."

Ethelbald had gained much fame as a warrior even before his father's death, for he was a bold and fearless leader of his people. But he had been, as we have seen, a bad son, and after he became king lived a godless and evil life. He soon excited much anger among his subjects by marrying his stepmother, Judith. Those who had deserted his father to go over to Ethelbald's side now turned against the son, and all the bishops of Wessex denounced his marriage as scandalous. Good Bishop Swithin hastened to the presence of Ethelbald, and implored him to annul his marriage with Judith; but this the headstrong King

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

refused to do, declaring that he cared nothing for the anger of his subjects. Fear of the Danes meanwhile prevented the West Saxons from driving Ethelbald from the throne, for his strong rule gave them peace from their cruel foes. His reign, however, was destined to be short. His death occurred in 860, only two and a half years after that of his father, Ethelwulf. He was buried in the Cathedral of Sherbrone, in Dorset.

Though by Ethelwulf's will, Ethelred should have succeeded to Wessex, the Witan, or Assembly of chief men, which then supplied the place of our Parliament, decided that the union of Wessex and Kent under Ethelbert would ensure greater strength against the Danes. Ethelred seems to have been quite willing to surrender his claims, so Ethelbert was made ruler of both kingdoms.

The new king, like his father, was peacefully inclined, and during his reign of five years avoided taking the field in person against the Danes. Nor did he attempt to stop their ravages, which consequently were renewed.

On a certain foggy night a few months after Ethelbert came to the throne, a fleet of Danes arrived off the coast of Hampshire. Under cover of the darkness their galleys crept swiftly up the river Itchen, and anchored in a deserted haven. The raiders then disembarked, and made for the beautiful old city of Winchester, which was at that time the capital of

## *The Locusts of the Baltic*

Wessex, and the favourite place of residence of the West Saxon kings.

The citizens were taken completely by surprise, and attempted little resistance. Houses were plundered, torn down, and burnt. Young and old, women and little children were slain without mercy, in their homes or in the open streets; even horses and dogs were cruelly butchered and left to die in agony. The cathedral was sacked, every priest massacred, and the treasures piled up in a great heap ready to carry off. Then loading themselves with their booty, the robbers set out for their boats, uttering loud shouts of defiance.

Meantime, however, news of their arrival had spread abroad. Troops hastily mustered, and led by the brave aldermen of Hampshire and Berkshire, hastened to intercept the plunder-laden Danes before they could reach their boats. A fight took place, in which the robbers were completely beaten by the English archers and swordsmen. As Dane after Dane fell dead a panic seized the survivors and they fled in confusion, leaving their plunder behind them. The English pursued them along the coast. Only a few Danes escaped, for their boats had been discovered and most of them destroyed.

Bishop Swithin was deeply grieved when he heard of the destruction of Winchester, his beautiful cathedral city. It is said that he never recovered

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

from the shock which the news gave him, and he died shortly afterward.

Alfred was now a boy of eleven. Though he was not yet old enough to join his brothers in fighting the Danes, he excelled in hunting and in all manly sports, and could wield the battle-axe better than any youth of his age in Wessex. The vast forests which then covered a great part of England were the home of many wild animals, including deer, wolves, badgers and wild boars; thus the chase in which Alfred delighted was a more dangerous pastime than it is in England at the present day.

While Alfred had all a boy's love of adventure, he was also fond of study and eager to acquire learning. But after the death of St Swithun there were few learned priests in England, and the young prince had much difficulty in finding teachers. He, however, studied whenever he could find an opportunity, and carried about with him a Book of Hours in which were written the services of the Church. He had an excellent memory, and learned many prayers and psalms by heart.

In 866 Ethelbert died, after a peaceful, mild, and honourable reign. He was succeeded by his younger and more warlike brother, Ethelred. Soon after Ethelred became king, the English were alarmed by the news that a huge fleet of Vikings was preparing to invade England.

The pirates declared that one of their princes,





"ALFRED KILLS HIS FIRST WILD BOAR" Page 36



## *The Locusts of the Baltic*

Ragnor Lodbrog, had been shipwrecked on the coast of Northumbria, the most northerly kingdom of England, and had been cruelly put to death by Ella, king of that region. Ragnor, they said, had been left to die in a pit known as the Serpent Prison, which was full of snakes and other reptiles. But he scorned fear and pain, and while dying no cry escaped his lips. Instead, he sang a death-chant, in which he recited his many gallant deeds, and declared that he joyfully claimed a place among the heroes of Valhalla.

“We fought with swords,” he sang. “We journeyed from the distant Gothland, up the Vistula, across Europe to the Northumbrian land, to the Isles of the North, to the Irish plains. In the Scottish gulfs I gained large spoils for the wolves. We fought with swords. This fills me still with joy, because I know the banquet is preparing by the Father of the gods. Soon in the Halls of Odin we shall drink mead out of the skulls of our foes. A brave man shrinks not at death, and I shall utter no repining words as I approach the Palace of the gods. The Fates are come for me, sent by Odin from the habitation of the gods. There shall I quaff full goblets of wine. The hours of my life are numbered; I die laughing.”

The story of Ragnor's death is probably quite untrue, but it served as an excuse for a great invasion of England, the Danes declaring that they would avenge the slaying of the hero, whose deeds had been their pride. So Vikings from the bays of Norway,

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

Sweden, Denmark, Jutland, and Russia, assembled in their galleys to share in the revenge. The huge fleet was commanded by eight kings and twenty earls, the relatives of Ragnor Lodbrog.

In the autumn of 867 they sailed for England, and landed on the shores of East Anglia, the kingdom which now forms the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk. The terrified inhabitants made no attempt to oppose them, but immediately offered to make a truce with the raiders. On condition that they received a large sum of money and provisions for the winter, the invaders promised to do the East Anglians no harm. It was also agreed that the Danes should be provided with English horses for their march northward in the spring. So the great army wintered in East Anglia.

As soon as the weather became milder the Danes set out northward, and took possession of the city of York. At first the Northumbrians did little to defend their kingdom, where a civil war had raged for some years between King Ella and Prince Osbert, who was the rightful heir to the throne. But when the news spread that a heathen army had crossed the Humber and was spreading desolation on every side, the Northumbrian nobles begged Ella and Osbert to forget their quarrels and unite for the defence of the kingdom. Inspired by terror of the invaders they consented after some delay to do so.

Meantime the Danes continued their ravages,

## *The Locusts of the Baltic*

plundering and burning many churches and monasteries throughout Northumbria. In early spring, the Northumbrians, led by the two kings and eight earls, ventured to make an attempt to retake York. The Danes, on hearing of their approach, hastily retired within the city walls, from behind which they prepared to defend themselves. But a large number of the English, following close on their heels, succeeded in entering the city, and began to destroy the walls, which were badly built and very frail.

The Danes, finding their only fortress in considerable danger, then decided to force a way for themselves through the ranks of the besiegers. On March 21, 868, they suddenly sallied forth, and the English, taken completely unawares, gave way before them. A battle was fought in which the Danes gained a great victory. Among the slain were the two rival kings and many of the Northumbrian nobles.

The whole of Northumbria was now in the power of the Northmen, for the inhabitants of that region had completely lost heart. The Danes set up a king of their own over the lands north of the Tyne. The southern portion of the kingdom they kept in their own hands, making it a rallying ground for the conquest of the South.

Many Danish settlements were founded in Northumbria about this time, and descendants of the Northmen are still living in and around the city of York.

## CHAPTER VI: *Prince Alfred's Marriage*

**W**HILE the Danes thus ravaged the lands north of the Humber, Wessex was left in peace. In 868, Alfred, who was then nineteen, was betrothed to Elswitha, the daughter of Ethelred, a powerful alderman, the ruler of a part of Lincolnshire.

Ethelred was the chief of a tribe called the Gaini, a name which Gainsborough, in Lincolnshire, still preserves. He bore the honourable surname of Mucel, or the Great, because he was 'great of body and old in wisdom.' On her mother's side Elswitha was connected with the royal family of Mercia, the middle kingdom of England.

In Alfred's time the marriage ceremony consisted of two parts, the betrothal and the giving away. The suitor had first to discuss with the bride's parents what he would pay them, if allowed to wed their daughter. In addition to the sum paid to the bride's father, it was the custom for the bridegroom to make a present to the bride herself, which, in the case of queens, often consisted of a residence and considerable estates. When all these matters had been settled, and the agreement signed before witnesses, the giving-away ceremony might take place, though months, and in some cases years, elapsed between this and the betrothal.

## *Prince Alfred's Marriage*

Alfred's marriage was celebrated in Mercia, probably at the house of the bride. At the giving-away ceremony a bishop was present to bless the union. He solemnly united the bridal pair, warning them that they were now to share each other's lot, in weal and woe, in peace and war. Most faithfully did Alfred and Elswitha keep to their vows throughout the thirty years of their married life. The prince had chosen wisely, for Elswitha proved a noble and devoted wife. The sufferings which she and Alfred underwent together in later years, through the pressure of the Danish invasions, only served to bind them more closely to each other.

Innumerable guests attended the wedding ceremonies. The festivities lasted for four days, and there was great rejoicing throughout Mercia and Wessex. Banquets were given at which there was much feasting, and enormous quantities of mead were drunk. Many entertainments were provided for the guests. Famous poets were invited to give recitations accompanied by music, for which they received liberal rewards. At that time the chief musical instrument was the harp, on which nearly every one except slaves could perform. It was the custom for travelling minstrels to wander from feast to feast relating to the rhythm of their harps the great deeds of our English forefathers. No doubt some of these old bards were present at Alfred's wedding. Flutes, pipes and fiddles were known in those days,

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

so we may be sure that there was no lack of music to enliven the entertainments.

In the midst of the wedding festivities the bridegroom was suddenly taken ill, and fell on the floor moaning with pain. The guests, in great alarm, crowded around him. Some whispered that it was an evil omen, others declared that he had been poisoned or struck down by some evil spirit.

His physicians were unable to discover the nature of his malady, but it was generally supposed to be the unexpected return of a painful disease from which he had suffered in his boyhood. Though Alfred soon recovered, he was subject to these sudden attacks of illness throughout the remainder of his life. Often he suffered so much pain from them that he despaired of living.

The following strange story is told by Asser concerning Alfred's malady. "From boyhood the prince had been the victim of a painful disease. One day when he was hunting in Cornwall he turned aside to pray in a little chapel in the midst of a forest. While there, he earnestly entreated God of His mercy to heal him of the disease, which threatened to unfit him for his duties as a ruler. At the same time he declared his willingness to suffer from some other malady which would not prevent him from labouring for the welfare of his people. His prayer was heard, for the disease departed from him, and, in its stead, he was afflicted



## *Prince Alfred's Marriage*

with the malady which first attacked him at his wedding."

Though we cannot tell how far this story is true, it is probable that Alfred saw in his malady an affliction sent from heaven to arm him against temptation. In spite of his bodily weakness his strong will enabled him to work all his life with untiring zeal for the good of others.

Soon after Alfred's wedding, news reached Wessex that the Danes had left Northumbria and were now invading Mercia. There were strong reasons why this news should cause deep anxiety to King Ethelred and his brother. Their only sister Elswitha had been married at the age of fifteen to Burhred, King of Mercia. The marriage had been celebrated at Chippenham with much pomp, and had caused great joy to the people of Wessex, for the two kingdoms thus became united by the closest ties.

The Danes had no sooner appeared in Mercia than Burhred sent to implore the help of his brothers-in-law. Immediately on receiving the message Ethelred mustered an army, and, with his brother Alfred, marched to Burhred's assistance. The opportunity to fight the Danes which Alfred had so long and ardently desired seemed to have come to him at last. We can imagine how eagerly he set out with the army on the march northward.

But a disappointment was in store for him. They found the Danes in a fortified camp at Nottingham.

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

The men of Wessex, joined by the Mercians, encamped in the neighbourhood, ready to do battle as soon as their enemies should advance into the open. But many days passed and the Danes remained behind their strong entrenchments. Meantime, the hired army of the Mercians melted away, and Burhred weakly decided to make peace with the Danes by offering them a large sum of money.

The cruel robbers took the money, and promised to leave Mercia in peace, but there was little hope that they would keep their word. Ethelred and Alfred then disbanded their army, and returned home with sinking hearts. Now they knew that their own kingdom of Wessex must ere long become the prey of the invaders.

## CHAPTER VII:

### *St Edmund King and Martyr; The Battle of Ashdown*

**A**FTER their conquest of Northumbria and Mercia the Danes marched through the country, plundering and burning all the great abbeys and churches. Among other famous monasteries, those of Croyland, Peterborough, Ely and Huntingdon, were levelled to the ground, and the monks and nuns murdered.

At Coldingham, beyond Berwick, there was a great abbey of nuns. The poor sisters wept bitterly when they heard of the approach of the Danes. They feared that when their Abbey had been destroyed they would be carried off and forced to marry the cruel robbers. This they dreaded more than death, for they had dedicated their lives to God. So St Ebba, the holy Abbess, told the nuns to cut off their noses and upper lips. When the barbarians arrived and saw the frightful faces of the nuns they no longer desired them for wives, but, before plundering the abbey, they slew all the unhappy nuns with the sword.

Outside Peterborough Cathedral there stood for many centuries a monument called 'The Monk's Stone.' It was placed over a pit in which were buried eighty monks of the monastery, all slain by the Danes in 870.

# *The Story of Alfred the Great*

Though the Danes had promised to leave East Anglia in peace, they did not keep their word. That kingdom was then ruled by Edmund, a noble Christian king who had inherited the crown when he was only fifteen years old. He was now thirty, and during the fifteen years of his reign had laboured for the welfare and happiness of his people. To the poor he gave generously, and all who went to him in trouble were received and helped. At Hunstanton, in Norfolk, then a small village, he caused a royal tower to be built, and there he often retired to enjoy solitude and to study.

But though King Edmund was generous and brave he was no warrior, and did not encourage his people to fight the Danes. Moreover, as the kingdom of East Anglia was nearly surrounded by water, having the sea on the north and east, and great stretches of marshland on the west, Edmund believed that it was secure from the invaders, or, at the worst, could be defended easily.

So when, in the spring of 870, a fleet landed 20,000 Danes on the coast of East Anglia, the inhabitants were quite unprepared to meet them in battle. King Edmund succeeded, however, in mustering a small body of troops, with which he advanced to Thetford, in Norfolk, and there they fought bravely against the savage invaders. But his small force was soon cut down, and he was obliged to retreat. The King determined to sacrifice no more lives in a hopeless

## *St Edmund King and Martyr*

struggle, so he disbanded his army. He then retired to his castle of Framlingham, in Suffolk.

The Danes sent messengers to King Edmund offering him his life and liberty if he would renounce Christ, worship the heathen god Odin, and govern under Danish supervision. To this message Edmund replied: "Go, tell your commander that I am neither terrified by his threats nor deceived by his promises. Destroy my frail body if you will; never will I submit to a pagan creed! It is more honourable to defend our liberties with our lives than to buy mercy with tears!"

The Danish leaders were furious on receiving this answer, and marched to seize the King. Edmund fled to a place called Hoxone, on the river Waveney, where he concealed himself all day under a bridge. In the evening the glitter of his golden spurs caused him to be discovered by a newly married couple, who were returning home by moonlight, and who betrayed him to the Danes. It is said that in the midst of his sufferings he poured forth a dreadful curse upon every couple who should afterwards cross the bridge on their way to or from their wedding. So long did the memory of this story linger, that, rather than go over the bridge, the newly married preferred to proceed by a more winding and tedious way.

Edmund was bound with chains and brought before the Danish chiefs. His life was again offered

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

to him on the same terms as before, but he indignantly refused to save himself at the cost of denying his faith. He was then beaten with cudgels and bound to a tree. The infidels amused themselves by using him as a mark at which to shoot, until his body was covered with arrows, but they cruelly refrained from inflicting a mortal wound. When they had tortured him until they were tired, they cut off his head and threw it into a thicket.

Forty days later his head was found between the paws of a wolf. It was said that a pillar of light miraculously guided the seekers to the spot where it lay. It was buried with his body at the place now called Bury St Edmund's. That ancient town still bears on its coat of arms the King's head between the paws of a wolf.

More than a hundred and fifty years later, Cnut, a brave and noble Danish king, who then ruled England, founded a Benedictine Abbey at Bury St Edmund's in honour of the martyr King.

Humbert, Bishop of the East Angles, who had crowned St Edmund and who was his faithful friend, was also murdered by the Danes about the same time that the King was slain.

The Vikings, having subdued all England with the exception of Wessex, now determined to attack that brave little kingdom. From the shores of East Anglia they embarked in their galleys, and sailed up the river Thames to the town of Reading, which

## *The Battle of Ashdown*

they seized. In the angle between the Thames and its tributary, the Kennet, where they were protected by water on three sides, they fixed their camp. From this place they sent out detachments of soldiers to ravage and plunder the neighbouring districts.

In spite of the disasters which they had suffered in former years from the cruel invaders, the spirit of the men of Wessex was not broken. At the call of King Ethelred they mustered loyally to his standard.

A large force under Ethelwulf, the alderman of Berkshire, met the Danes at Englefield, a few miles from Windsor. A furious battle raged, but the Danes were at last completely defeated and one of their kings slain. This victory gave great encouragement to the English.

Meantime Ethelred and Alfred advanced at the head of a large army, and soon after the victory at Englefield ventured to storm Reading. But the Danes, suddenly 'bursting out of the gates like wolves,' drove the English in headlong flight before them, and pursued the fugitives along the river banks nearly to Windsor. On the way the brave alderman, Ethelwulf of Berkshire, was slain.

After this the Danes left Reading and made a raid along the Thames valley. It was now their intention to subdue the whole kingdom and to plant Danish settlements there. At a place called Ashdown, supposed to be the White Horse Hill in Berk-

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

shire, was fought one of the greatest battles in the history of the Danish invasions.

Ethelred and Alfred had rallied their beaten troops, and determined to make a desperate effort to save the kingdom. The Danes were first on the field, and chose the best position, on a height in the ridge of Berkshire Downs, while the army of Ethelred and Alfred lay at some distance below them.

The Danes divided their army into two parts. The larger portion was commanded by their two kings, Bagsec and Halfden, and the smaller by the earls. Ethelred and Alfred also divided their forces. It was decided that King Ethelred and his men should attack the two pagan kings, while Alfred and his troops fought the division commanded by the earls.

King Ethelred was at early mass in his tent when a message was brought to him that the Danes were advancing to the attack. "I will serve God first and man afterwards," he said, and he ordered the service to continue until the last word had been said.

Alfred, who was already in his place at the head of his division, waited long for his brother, but still he came not. Meantime the Danes were moving down the hill-side, and it was certain that if the English remained where they were they would soon be driven down by the onslaught of the enemy.

So Alfred took the command himself, and at the head of his troops pushed uphill 'like a fierce wild





ALFRED AT ASHDOWN

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boar.' Near a stunted thorn bush, which for long afterward marked the place of their collision, the hostile armies met, with a great crash of spears and shields. Above the Danish host floated the famous banner of the Raven, which was said to have been woven by three princesses in a single day. The Sacred Bird was said to flutter its wings when victory was certain, but hung motionless and drooping when defeat was threatened.

A long and desperate conflict followed, but at length Alfred with his men broke the Danish lines and the enemy gave way and fled. King Bagsec, five earls, and over a thousand Danes were slain. King Ethelred only arrived in time to join in the pursuit, which was continued until the following day. Thus the glory of the victory was Alfred's alone. The English pursued the retreating Danes to Reading and slew all who lagged behind on the way.

In memory of this great victory the men of Berkshire have ever since preserved on the northern slope the figure of a White Horse cut deep in the chalk, out of the crisp turf of the downs. At intervals the White Horse is cleansed of weeds and rubbish, and may be seen from a great distance gleaming in the bright sunlight.

Though this victory had checked the power of the Danes they were by no means crushed. During the next few months they were strengthened by fresh arrivals from the shores of the Baltic, and soon gained

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new victories at Basing, in Hampshire, and at Merton, in Surrey.

At the latter place King Ethelred was mortally wounded and died at Eastertide of the same year, 871. His death was followed by the election of his brother Alfred to the throne of Wessex.

## CHAPTER VIII: *Long Live the King!*

**A**LFRED at the age of twenty-two came to the throne of his ancestors in a dark hour. The supremacy of Wessex, won by his grandfather, Egbert, over the rest of England, had vanished, and the greater part of the country was in the power of the Danes. Alfred would gladly have refused the crown, but he knew that no other leader of royal blood was available to take his place. Though Ethelred had left two little sons, their tender age caused the Witan to put aside their claims, for in those days it was the chief duty of a king to lead his troops to battle.

So Alfred buried Ethelred, the last of his brothers, in Wimborne Cathedral, in Dorset, and then, sad at heart, hurried northward to prepare once more to meet the enemy. It was no time for idle weeping nor even for coronation festivities, much as the people of Wessex rejoiced at the accession of their favourite prince.

The first weeks of Alfred's reign were spent by him in efforts to raise and train fresh troops, for many of his finest soldiers and bravest leaders had been slain. The whole fighting force of the kingdom, known as the 'fyrd,' was now organized by Alfred on a better system. In order that there might be less difficulty

## *Long Live the King!*

in raising troops at short notice, he ordered that half the men should always be ready to fight while the other half remained at home.

A month after his brother's death, King Alfred and his troops met the enemy on a hill near Wilton, in Wiltshire. After a long and fierce fight the Danes unexpectedly turned and fled. But their flight was only a pretence to deceive the King's men, and, suddenly turning on their pursuers, they killed a large number of them.

This year (871) had been a terrible one for Wessex. South of the Thames nine great battles, and skirmishes without number, had been fought against the Danes. The beautiful country once so prosperous was now ruined and desolate. No corn had been sown, neither had the burnt houses been rebuilt, and there was poverty and distress on every hand.

Thus does an ancient writer describe the incursions of the fierce invaders: "If the Danes were sometimes defeated, victory was of no avail, inasmuch as a descent was made in some other quarter by a large fleet and a more numerous force. It was wonderful how, when the English kings were hastening to encounter them in the eastern districts, before they could fall in with the enemy's band a hurried messenger would arrive and say: 'Sire king, whither are you marching? The heathen have disembarked from a countless fleet on

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

the southern coast and is ravaging the towns and villages, carrying fire and slaughter into every quarter.'

"The same day another messenger would come running and say: 'Sire king, whither are you retreating? A terrible army has landed in the west of England, and if you do not quickly turn your face toward them, they will think you are fleeing and follow in your rear with fire and sword.'

"Again the same day, or the morrow, another messenger would arrive, saying, 'What place, O noble chief, are you making for? The Danes have made a descent in the north; already they have burnt your mansions, even now they are sweeping away your goods; they are tossing your young children on the points of their spears; your wives they have carried off for slaves.'

"Bewildered by such various tidings of bitter woe both kings and people lost their vigour both of mind and body, and were utterly cast down, so that even when they defeated the enemy victory was not attended with its wonted triumphs and supplied no confidence of safety for the future."

At length Alfred decided that, for the sake of his unhappy people, he must make peace for a time with the Danes. He offered them a large sum of money on condition that they would leave Wessex. As the invaders had suffered heavy losses themselves they agreed to accept the money which the King could so

## *Long Live the King!*

ill afford to give them, and departed northward. So for the next four years Wessex was free from their invasions.

The Danish army crossed the Thames and entered London, which was then the capital of Mercia. As Alfred had made peace with the invaders he was too honourable to break his word, and therefore could not go to the help of his brother-in-law. King Burhred, who had lost all hope and courage, did not attempt to oppose his fierce enemies, but at once offered them all the money he had if they would leave his kingdom. The Danes took the money and departed to Northumbria, but it was not long before they returned and demanded more. The unfortunate King Burhred was now helpless, for he had no more money to give them and his soldiers refused to muster at his call. So he decided to give up the struggle.

One dark night, Burhred, disguised as a poor pilgrim, stole from his castle and made his way to the coast. There he found a ship on which he embarked for Flanders, and thence journeyed on foot to Rome, desiring only to end his days in some peaceful monastery far from the trouble and strife which vexed his unhappy kingdom.

Ill and weary from the toils of the long journey, Burhred at last reached Rome, but he arrived only to die. He was buried in the Church of St Mary, which was attached to the Saxon College. "There,"

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says and old chronicle, "he awaits the coming of the Lord and the final resurrection of the just." His wife, Elswitha, found refuge with her brother, King Alfred, in Wessex. Some years later she, too, set out on a pilgrimage to Rome to visit the tomb of her husband, but she died on the way, at Pavia.

The Danes placed on the throne of Mercia a king of their own choice named Cœlwulf, a weak and foolish man, who had been one of Burhred's thanes. Cœlwulf was allowed to rule only on condition that he obeyed the Danes in all things. To raise tribute for the robbers he cruelly oppressed his people. At length, when the Danes had wrung all the money they could out of the people of Mercia, they drove Cœlwulf from the throne, and left him to die in poverty.

The four years during which Wessex enjoyed peace were spent by King Alfred in building a navy. He saw that as long as the Saxons possessed no fleet they could have little chance of success against a nation of sea-rovers. So he commanded boats and long-galleys to be built at every seaport in his kingdom, and exerted himself to find trained crews for them. To teach his men seamanship he even engaged the services of some of the pirates, who did not care for whom they worked so long as they were well paid.

It took a long time to build enough galleys to



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fight the huge Danish fleet, and at first Alfred's navy must have been very small and modest. In the year 875, however, Alfred ventured to attack seven small Danish ships in the Channel. One of these he captured, and his galleys chased the other a long way out to sea.

In the following year (876) the Danes divided their great army into two parts. One part went north to harry the countries beyond the Tyne, while the other marched to the coast and embarked for the south on board the fleet.

One day news was brought to King Alfred that a huge force of Danes had suddenly landed in Dorset, and seized Wareham. There they took up their position in the angle between the rivers Frome and Trent, in one of their usual water-girt camps. Alfred lost no time in marching against them, at the head of the whole levy of Wessex. He surrounded their camp on every side, blockading them so closely that none could get out to seek provisions. Very soon there was no food in the Danish camp, and the robbers became so hungry that their leaders were forced to ask for terms of peace.

King Alfred knew that the Danes were not to be trusted, and that there was little hope of their keeping any promises they might make. However, he invited the leaders to a solemn meeting, at which he and his chiefs chose as hostages some of the most distinguished men in the Danish army. It was

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agreed that these men should remain with Alfred, and that their lives should be forfeited if the Danes did not keep their promises.

The King then told the Danish leaders that he would allow their army to pass only on condition that they promised to leave Wessex, and to trouble his kingdom no more. To this they readily agreed. Alfred then ordered a casket containing the relics of Christian saints to be brought to him. On this he and his chiefs laid their hands, and solemnly swore that they would allow the Danes to depart in peace.

The King knew, however, that the pagans cared little for oaths sworn on the relics of Christian saints, and he determined to make them swear according to their own heathen customs. So he placed on a table a sacred bracelet smeared with the blood of animals sacrificed to their gods, and commanded the Danes to lay their hands on it while they swore to leave his kingdom in peace for ever. He knew that this was a form of oath which the Northmen usually held as binding. When this ceremony had been duly performed and they had called on the God of the Christians and on the gods of the pagans to witness their oaths, the meeting broke up.

But the Danes were too dishonourable and shameless to care even for the solemn oaths they had sworn. On that same night, no sooner was the King off his guard than all the invaders who had horses

## *Long Live the King!*

made a sudden sally, and slipped past the English lines. Riding day and night without stopping they entered and took possession of the old city of Exeter, where they established themselves for the winter.

## CHAPTER IX: *A Great Naval Victory*

**I**N the middle of the night on which the Danes broke their oath and set off for Exeter, King Alfred was roused from sleep by his indignant thanes, who loudly denounced the treachery of the robbers. What was to be done? The chiefs crowded around the King and declared that they could fight no more. The best and bravest had been slain in battle, their homes were ruined, their lands desolated. It were better to give up the struggle and let the enemy work their will on the unhappy kingdom.

The King sat listening in silence. Not once did he interrupt, as leader after leader stepped forward and told the tale of his sufferings and wrongs. It was all true, and the King knew it. When the last man had ceased speaking there was a prolonged silence. Alfred still sat as if lost in thought. At length an old thane touched him on the shoulder, and whispered that they awaited his decision. Would he give orders to disband the army?

The King started as if suddenly awakened from a dream, and rose to his feet. His eyes, in which burned a strange fire, travelled slowly over the faces of the silent Saxon chiefs, scanning them closely. At last he spoke.

“You wish to know my purpose,” he said. “It is this: as long as one man stands by me, as long as

## *A Great Naval Victory*

I possess a single galley, as long as life remains in me, I shall continue to defend my country and to hope for victory!"

As he concluded a youth sprang forward and knelt at the King's feet. "And I, O King, will follow thee to victory or to death," he said. A loud cheer broke from the others, and fired by the young thane's example, they, one by one, came forward and, kneeling, tendered once more their allegiance to the hero-hearted king.

On the morrow the whole Saxon army, led by Alfred, set out in pursuit of the Danes, and had little difficulty in tracing them to Exeter. The whole country was now on the alert, and the trembling villagers hastened to give all the information they could about the route taken by the enemy.

On arriving before the walls of Exeter the King ordered his troops to surround the city as they had done at Wareham, and so prevent any of the Danes escaping to seek provisions. For some weeks, however, the Northmen were able to obtain food by plundering the city. They had good hopes too that the division of their army which had remained at Wareham would send a fleet to their relief. This would have had little difficulty in reaching them, since Exeter is built on the navigable river Exe, and is not far from the sea.

Succour might be expected, too, from other quarters, for all along the coasts the sea swarmed with the

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

galleys of bold pirates who watched only for an opportunity to sail up the river Exe.

Alfred dispatched hurried messengers to the commanders of his navy, which, during the last two years, had increased considerably in strength. The King's orders were that his ships should be manned immediately by all the most daring sailors who were acquainted with the coast, and that the vessels should cruise in the Channel to watch that no transport ships laden with provisions or troops came to the help of the Danes in Exeter. If they appeared, they were to be driven back, and if the English commanders considered they had any chance of victory they had permission to engage in a sea fight.

The King's orders were strictly carried out. Never for one hour during the months that followed did the commanders relax their vigilance in watching the coast. At length, sure enough, in the spring of 877, the Danish garrison at Wareham embarked in 120 vessels, and sailed westward along the coast to carry relief to their besieged countrymen in Exeter.

A thick fog overhung the coast, and the Danes had not proceeded far before they were overtaken by violent storms. For a whole month the pirate fleet was tossed about within half a mile of the shore, which they vainly attempted to regain. Many of the vessels were disabled by the violence of the tempest, and their broken rigging had to be thrown overboard.

## *A Great Naval Victory*

At length, when they had been driven back to a place near Peveril Point, on the coast of Dorset, where dangerous reefs run out into the sea, the commanders of the Saxon fleet determined to attack them. The moment was well chosen, for the Viking fleet, shattered by storms, was unable to defend itself. Many of those on board were slain, and as the battle continued the Danish vessels were driven nearer and nearer to the dreadful cliffs. On the rocks off Swanage they struck at last with a terrific crash; the intrepid pirates went down with their ships, fighting to the last. Fragments of wrecked vessels strewed the seas for many miles. Thus the great Danish fleet, with its army of many thousands on board, was buried beneath the waves.

Meantime the Danes, besieged in Exeter, were still depending for help on the squadron which they expected would come to them from Wareham. Day after day they watched the mouth of the Exe, their anxiety increasing as the time passed, and their stock of provisions decreased. Famine at length forced the Danish leaders to sue for terms of peace. Once more they made solemn vows, declaring that if King Alfred would allow them to depart from Exeter they would trouble Wessex no more.

The King consented, and in August 877 the Danish garrison, weak and exhausted from famine, passed the Saxon lines on the way northward. So reduced were the Danes in numbers and in strength that this

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

time they were forced to keep their word, and to retreat from Wessex. One division of their army set out for Mercia, while the other advanced to Gloucester. At the latter place they were joined by fresh swarms of Northmen who had landed in Wales for the purpose of plundering the poor Celts of that country.

King Alfred now believed that his kingdom of Wessex was safe from invasion for at least some time to come. So he ordered the Wessex fyrd to disband, and the men returned to their homes.

Winter, cold and drear, settled over the country. Roads became impassable from the snows and heavy rains, and towns and villages were cut off from communication with each other. But to the sea-robbers whose chief highway was the ocean, this mattered little.

Meantime the Danes, finding that they could get little booty from the poor mountaineers in Wales, determined to return south. The western portion of Wessex had up to this time been spared, and there many flourishing towns and villages remained to be plundered.

This time they planned to invade Wessex from two points at once, one army marching from the north, while another embarked in twenty-two war-galleys for the coast of Devonshire, where they landed. So unexpectedly did they arrive that the men of Wessex knew nothing of their approach,



## *A Great Naval Victory*

until the news spread abroad that the terrible enemy was again in their midst.

From the coast of Devon the invaders marched to a strong fortress known as Kynwith Castle, where many of the King's followers under Odda, Count of Devonshire, had taken refuge. As the walls of this castle were very strong, the Danes determined not to assault it, but to surround it on all sides. The cruel robbers knew that there was no spring of water within the castle gates, so that the garrison would soon be forced by thirst to surrender. The pagan host sat down to drink and feast, while the brave Saxons within the castle, encouraged by Count Odda determined to hold out as long as they could.

All night the sound of boisterous revelry continued to reach the Saxons from the Danish camp. Towards morning the uproar ceased, for the Danes, overcome by their carousals, had fallen into heavy sleep. A spy sent by Count Odda crept silently from the gates to the enemy's camp, and on his return reported that the guards were asleep at their posts, and that no watch was kept.

Without delay the Saxons armed themselves, and, issuing from the castle, bore down upon the sleeping Danes. The pagans were taken completely by surprise and 1200 of them slain. Only a few stragglers in a wild flight reached their ships, which were drawn up at no great distance. They left behind them not only much booty, but also the famous standard of

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

the Raven, which fell into the hands of the West Saxons.

This, however, was the last victory won by the men of Wessex for many a day, and long before news of it reached King Alfred nearly the whole of his kingdom was again in the power of the Danes.

On the banks of the river Avon, in Wiltshire, stands the town of Chippenham, which in Saxon times was a great centre of trade. There, too, was a strong fortress where the King frequently resided. The invading host, which had advanced from the northwest, strengthened by many Danes who had joined it from Mercia, suddenly advanced into Wiltshire and seized the castle. Having established themselves there under their leader, Guthrum, who had been made Danish king of East Anglia, they sent out raiding parties to different parts of the kingdom. Once more homesteads were burned, churches and monasteries destroyed, towns and villages sacked.

“The robbers,” says an old chronicle, “spread like locusts over the country, where none resisted them, and took possession of it for themselves.”

Meantime, King Alfred made efforts to raise the fyrd, but the messengers sent by him throughout the country were nearly all captured and murdered by the enemy. The darkest hour for Wessex had come at last. The people, depressed, spoiled and scattered, could no longer defend themselves, and to the enemy

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the conquest seemed complete. Worst of all, Alfred had disappeared, and a rumour, which chilled the hearts of his people, spread throughout the country that the King had fled from Wessex and was on his way to Rome.

## CHAPTER X: *Alfred's Adventures in Athelney*

THE rumour that Alfred had deserted his kingdom in its hour of greatest danger was entirely false. Nothing could have been farther from his purpose, for he alone among his people had not lost hope, nor did he ever cease to form plans for fresh efforts against his enemies.

In the midst of the great marsh of Sedgemoor, in Somersetshire, now intersected by drains and ditches, is a small eminence covering about two acres of ground, near the junction of the rivers Parret and Tone. At that time the spot was frequently transformed into an island, when an incoming tide swept up the Bristol Channel, turning the peat bogs and swamps into broad lagoons. The rising ground, which was afterwards named Athelney, or Prince's Island, was at such times very difficult to reach except in a small boat, or even then only by those well acquainted with the marshes. It was covered by a great wood of alders, in which roamed stags, goats, and other animals.

In this desolate spot, Alfred, with his wife and family and a few faithful followers, had taken refuge. There they erected some rude fortifications, and built wooden huts in which they lived for several months, enduring many hardships from the cold and scarcity of food, as supplies were difficult to

## *Alfred's Adventures in Athelney*

obtain. The King's life was in constant danger, for at this time it is believed that numbers of his own subjects were offended with him for the stern measures he had adopted to raise money and troops against the enemy. Some of these would have betrayed him willingly to the Danes, but the poor peasants of Somerset, who knew this place of retreat, refused to do so, even for the large sum of money which they would thus have obtained from the invaders.

It was the month of January when the royal fugitives took refuge in the marshes, and they remained there until May. Such valuables as they had been able to save had been taken with them. In the year 1693, more than 800 years after Alfred's sojourn in Athelney, a wonderful jewel was found there. It was discovered at Newton Park, in Somersetshire, near the river Parret, somewhat to the north of the spot where the island and fortress of Athelney were formerly situated.

This jewel, which is now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, is believed to have formed part of the royal sceptre, and was probably lost by Alfred in the days of his homeless wanderings. It consists of an oval-shaped polished crystal about two inches long, and half an inch thick, covered with a mosaic enamel of green and yellow, representing a sitting figure, holding a lily in each hand. Some have supposed that the figure represents Christ or one of the early

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English saints; others think that it is merely a representation of the King himself.

The back of the crystal is covered with gold, engraven with a flower. Round the oval-shaped sides is a border of beaten gold, on which may be read the remarkable words in early English:

*Ælfred mec heht gewyrcan.*

(Alfred ordered me to be made)

The letters are all in capitals and of the same form as those in manuscripts known to have been written in Alfred's time. Where the gold border is joined, it is finished by a beautifully worked dolphin's head in gold, of which the empty eye-sockets must once have contained precious stones, and from whose open jaws a gold pin protrudes. The pin probably served to fasten the jewel to a staff or sceptre.

Many wonderful stories are told of King Alfred's adventures during his wanderings in Athelney. Most of these tales were written down long after the events related in them happened, and it is now difficult to separate fact from legend. It seems probable that some of the many adventures recorded happened to Alfred not during his stay in Athelney, but at other periods in his life. Many of the tales are taken from the songs of the old bards, who used to wander from feast to feast, relating the wonderful deeds of Alfred and other great heroes.

One day when Alfred was out on a foraging ex-

## *Alfred's Adventures in Athelney*

pedition in the forest, he was overtaken by a storm, and found shelter in a hut. This hut was the home of a faithful cowherd, who had kept the secret of the King's concealment even from his wife. During her husband's absence the wife was employed in baking cakes, and she gave Alfred permission to sit by the fire. From the shabby appearance of the stranger she took him for a poor serf or one of her husband's mates, and she ordered him to mind the cakes while she went to look after the cattle.

But as Alfred sat mending his bow and arrows and meditating on the troubles of his country, the cakes began to burn. When the cowherd's wife returned she scolded him for not removing them from the fire.

"You will not trouble to look after the cakes, though you will be quick enough to eat them," she said.

Some writers state that the name of the loyal cowherd was Denewulf. Alfred had first met him while wandering in the forest, and on entering into conversation with the man was struck by his remarkable intelligence. The King afterward caused him to be educated, and he rose to be Bishop of Winchester. It is well known that a certain Denewulf who had risen from a very humble position, became Bishop of Winchester in 879. But as it seems unlikely that he could have risen in so short a time, his first meeting with the King most probably occurred before Alfred's sojourn in Athelney.

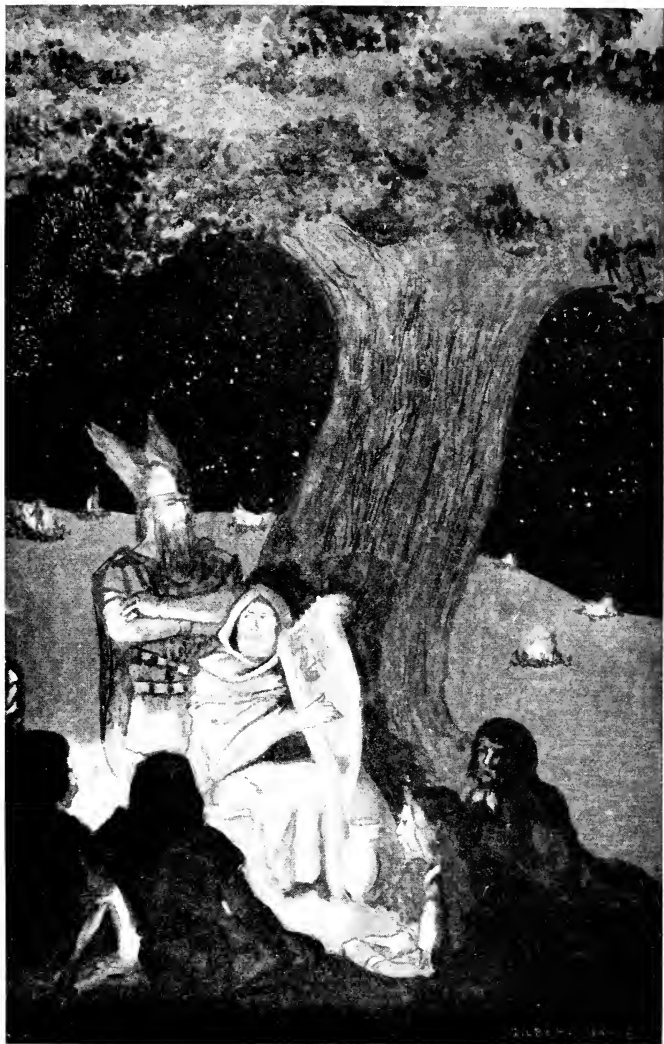
## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

From what we know of Alfred we may be sure that the hospitality he received from the poorest of his subjects during the days of his wanderings was not forgotten or left unrewarded when his kingly rights were restored to him.

Once during these months, Alfred is said to have left Athelney, and journeyed in disguise to Cornwall, to take counsel with the holy hermit, St Neot, who dwelt in the solitude of a mountain cave. St Neot, who is supposed to have been related to Alfred, was a deformed dwarf, so small that he could not reach the altar without standing on a stool. Alfred is known to have visited this hermit on more than one occasion, though it is uncertain that he did so during his stay in Athelney.

The next story reads like a fairy tale, although the events related in it are not altogether impossible. One day, when King Alfred was hunting in the forest, he heard the cry of an infant, which seemed to come from a tree, so he dispatched some of his servants to seek for the child. They climbed a great tree, and on the top, in an eagle's nest, found a beautiful male child clothed in purple, with gold bracelets on his arms. They hastened to bring the infant to the King, who caused him to be baptized and cared for. The foundling was named Nestigus in memory of the singular place of his discovery. It is said that on reaching manhood he rose to great honour in the land.





"ALFRED PLAYING A HARP IN THE DANISH CAMP" Page 74



## *Alfred's Adventures in Athelney*

During his stay in Athelney, King Alfred was carefully planning a great campaign against the Danes as soon as the time should be ripe for action. But he was uncertain of the strength of the enemy, and did not know what force it would be necessary to muster before he could venture to meet them. As he could trust no one but himself to count his foes, he decided to visit their camp at Chippenham.

The King, who was a skilful musician, disguised himself as a harper and set out with one attendant. Having made their way safely through Selwood Forest to Wiltshire, they reached the Danish camp. Guthrum, the Danish chief, little suspecting who the minstrel was, invited him to remain for some days in the camp, and to give entertainment by playing and singing. The King did so, and was thus able not only to learn the numbers of his enemies, but also to obtain much valuable information concerning their plans of attack.

Perhaps the most beautiful story among those related of Alfred's stay in Athelney is that known as the Legend of St Cuthbert. One cold winter's day all Alfred's followers had gone out to fish, leaving only himself, his wife, and one faithful servant. While the King sat reading the Psalms of David, endeavouring thus to find consolation in his trouble, there came to the door of the hut a poor pilgrim who begged for food.

# *The Story of Alfred the Great*

“What food have we in the house?” asked the King of his servant.

“My lord, we have but one loaf, and a little wine,” was the reply.

“Give half the loaf and half the wine to the pilgrim,” said the King.

The servant did as the King commanded, and the pilgrim departed, giving grateful thanks. Soon afterward the servant wondered exceedingly on seeing that the loaf was unbroken and the pitcher of wine full to the brim. The King, too, marvelled how the pilgrim had come and departed, for he had no boat.

In the evening, the King's followers returned very joyful, for they had taken so great a catch of fish that their boats were full. That same night there appeared to the King in a dream an old black-haired man clothed in priest's garb and with a mitre on his head. In his right hand he held a book of the gospels adorned with gold and gems.

“I am Cuthbert, the soldier of Christ,” he said. “To you I came this day in the guise of a poor pilgrim begging for alms. Be of good cheer, for your charity is remembered before God, Who will soon give you the victory over your enemies.”

St Cuthbert then told the King that if he would repair to a certain spot on the following day he would find a band of faithful followers ready to fight for him.

## *Alfred's Adventures in Athelney*

Next morning the King rose early, crossed over to the mainland in a boat, and blew his horn three times as St Cuthbert had directed. The sound inspired his friends with courage and filled the hearts of his enemies with terror. By noon, five hundred gallant warriors gathered around him, and soon he led them on to victory.

St Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, who died in 687, and to whom Durham Cathedral is dedicated, had been honoured by Alfred as his particular saint.

## CHAPTER XI: *The Turn of the Tide*

THE coming of spring in the marshes of Athelney awoke new hope in the hearts of Alfred and his faithful followers. During the winter months the King had been laying his plans carefully. Soon after Easter, which in that year fell on March 23, he sent messages to the men of Wessex: "Let every man, who is not worthless, come."

At first many people refused to believe that this summons came from the King whom they had supposed dead, or fled over the seas. Everywhere throughout the country the Danish arms had conquered, and the peasants, too much dispirited to make further resistance, were turning to Odin and Thor, the gods of the pagans. During that dreary winter the English had given up hope of happier times, and it would be a hard task to rouse them once more to fight for the deliverance of their country. To many, a renewal of the struggle seemed but a forlorn hope. All this the King knew, yet he never despaired.

The place appointed for the rendezvous was near a huge rock known as Egbert's Stone (now Brixton), lying in a secluded grove east of Selwood Forest, which at that time formed the boundary between Devonshire and Somerset. Alfred knew that this

## *The Turn of the Tide*

place could be reached easily by forest paths unknown to the Northmen.

Early in the month of May 878, the King left Athelney with the little band of those who had remained loyal to him, and rode to the place of meeting. With him rode Ethelnoth, alderman of Somerset, who, with a small force, had joined the King at Athelney.

On reaching the place of meeting, Alfred ordered the Golden Dragon of Wessex to be unfurled above his tent, and in the evening beacons were lighted on the neighbouring hills. The King's courage did much to sustain his weary followers, though a rumour had reached them that few troops would rally to the royal standard. Events were to prove, however, that Alfred had not hoped in vain, for the certainty that he was still alive was sufficient to fill the men of Wessex with renewed courage.

During the days that followed, one after another of the nobles of Somerset, Wiltshire, and Hampshire arrived at Egbert's Stone with their men, and placed themselves at the King's service.

When Alfred appeared among them to review the assembled troops, he was greeted with loud shouts of welcome. The sight of the hero-king whom they had supposed dead awoke all the old enthusiasm in the breasts of the soldiers. It seemed as though they could never gaze on him long enough to satisfy their eyes. Once more his matchless courage inspired

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them to heroic deeds, and they were ready as of old to follow him to death. When Alfred addressed to them a few words of kindly encouragement, expressing his confidence in their loyalty, cheer after cheer echoed through the forest.

Yet the army mustered was small compared with that of the Danes, and Alfred knew that his only chance of success was to take the enemy by surprise. It was agreed that they should advance immediately on the Danish camp, not by the high roads, which were probably watched, but by less frequented ways through the forests.

Their first day's march brought them to Iglea, now Westbury, in Wilts, where they encamped for the night. At daybreak on the following morning they continued their way, a march of six miles bringing them in sight of the Danish camp. The enemy lay encamped on a hill at Ethandune, now Edington, in Wilts. An attack from the conquered and dispirited Saxons was the last thing they expected.

So when the Saxon army, led by the great King himself, suddenly appeared round a bend on the hill-side, the terrified Northmen could scarcely believe their eyes. Arming themselves as hastily as possible, however, they prepared to meet their foes with all their old daring.

King Alfred ordered his troops to advance in a close mass holding their shields in front of them, and they thus succeeded in keeping together in spite of



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the fierce onsets of the Northmen. The battle began in the afternoon and lasted till sunset. The Saxons fought as they had never fought before, spurred on to deeds of valour by their royal leader 'whose look shone like that of a shining angel in battle.' It was a desperate encounter. Each side fought with the knowledge that on the result of the battle depended the whole future of England. But at last victory was on the side of Wessex. The Danish lines broke, and the Northmen fled in disorder.

The sun set that night on a Wessex victorious and free. The danger that England would become a pagan land was over for ever. Many Northmen were taken prisoners, and many more were slain. The rest fled from the battle-field. The men of Wessex followed up their success by a swift pursuit. The fugitives reached a fortress, which is believed to have been on Bratton Hill, near Edington. Into this stronghold they threw themselves, and were soon surrounded by the victorious Saxons. For fourteen days the siege continued. The Northmen had been given no time to lay in provisions, and they were without hope of help from without. Vanquished by hunger, cold and misery, the Danes soon implored Alfred to raise the siege. A message was sent to the King from Guthrum the Danish leader, humbly offering to agree to any terms which the King might grant.

The great King, touched with pity for his enemies

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

in spite of the wrongs they had done him, consented to relieve them. This time he knew that they had been too badly beaten to break their oaths for a long while to come. Alfred took as many hostages as he pleased from the Danish army, though they did not require any from him. To show still further that he was sincere in his wish to make peace, Guthrum declared that he wished to be baptized as a Christian. Most probably his reason was that the god of the Saxons had proved stronger than Odin, and he wished to serve the more powerful God. But his request also meant that he and his followers wished to give up their wild life and to settle down in that part of England, which was still theirs by right of conquest.

King Alfred was filled with joy on hearing the news. He at once withdrew his troops to the village of Aller in Somerset, and allowed the Danes to issue from their fortress to seek supplies. Seven weeks after the battle of Edington, Guthrum, with thirty of the Danish chiefs, arrived at Alfred's camp at Aller to receive baptism. It must have been an impressive sight when Guthrum and his thirty bearded warriors knelt at the baptismal font.

In the church of St Andrew at Aller, there is still shown a very ancient Saxon font, in which, according to tradition, Guthrum and the thirty Danish nobles were baptized by Ethelred, Archbishop of Canterbury. King Alfred stood godfather to his old

## *The Turn of the Tide*

enemy Guthrum, who received the Christian name of Athelstan. Following the custom of the time, bands of white linen, called the chrismale cloths, were bound round the heads of the newly baptized Danes, and were worn for eight days.

After the ceremony, the Danes accompanied Alfred to Wedmore in Somerset, where the King had a summer palace, and where he had ordered the Witan of Wessex to assemble. There the Danes were most honourably entertained by the King for twelve days. On the eighth day, the ceremony of removing the linen bands known as the 'chrism loosing' took place, and was performed by Alderman Ethelnoth of Somerset. The next step was the drawing up of an agreement known as the Treaty of Wedmore between Alfred, the West Saxon Witan, and all the people of Wessex on the one hand, and Guthrum, his army, and all the Danes who had settled in East Anglia on the other.

In making this treaty, Alfred set aside his own ambition, and acted for the good of his people, who had suffered much from the long wars. By continuing the struggle he might have made himself King of all England, but he knew that peace would be the greatest benefit he could bestow on the land.

In Northumbria, East Anglia, and Mercia, the Danes had now been settled for many years, and the noble-hearted King, instead of thirsting for revenge for the wrongs they had done him, consented to allow them to remain there. A frontier line was drawn

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

between the country ruled by the Danes and the kingdom of Alfred. This line answered in the main to Watling Street, the old Roman road which led from London to St Albans, and continued in a north-westerly direction to Wroxeter, near Shrewsbury.

It was agreed that the Danes should hold Northumbria, East Anglia, and the northern half of Mercia, while Alfred ruled the southern half of Mercia, Wessex, and Kent. The Danes living in these territories were to have equal rights of justice with the English, and the penalty for injuring an Englishman or a Dane was to be the same.

Soon after this treaty the Danes went to Cirencester in Gloucestershire, where they were allowed to winter, though the place was within Alfred's territory. Before their departure the generous King loaded them with presents. Some accounts state that all the Danes who refused to become Christians set out for Gaul under the leadership of Hastings, a great seaking.

In the part of England where the Danes settled many of the inhabitants at the present day are descendants of the old Vikings, who were once such fierce enemies of the English. Their part of the country became known as the Danelagh because the Danish law prevailed there. You may know where they lived by looking on the map of England for the names of places ending in 'by' which was the Danish word for town. Thus Kirkby, Derby, Grimsby, etc.,

## *The Turn of the Tide*

were Danish settlements, while the words 'ham,' 'thorp,' and 'ton' mark Saxon names.

Alfred was too prudent to seek to change the laws of that part of Mercia which now fell under his rule. He allowed the Mercians to have their own Witan, as they had had in the time of King Burhred and appointed as alderman, Ethelred, a nobleman of the old kingly house of Mercia. To him Alfred gave in marriage his eldest daughter Ethelfleda, who must at that time have been scarcely ten years old. This princess was much beloved by the people over whom her husband ruled, and became known later as the Lady of Mercia.

The peace between Alfred and the Danes, although it was broken many times, became in the end a real blessing to the whole country. By degrees the Danes and English became bound together by the ties of religion and trade. Many Danes married English wives, and settled down peacefully in the country, and the two races which had come originally from the same stock gained much from each other.

## CHAPTER XII: *King Alfred's Laws*

**D**URING the five years of peace that followed the battle of Ethandune, King Alfred set himself an even harder and nobler task than the deliverance of Wessex from the Danes. He determined not only to repair the ruin caused by the invaders, and to reform the army and navy, but also re-establish just law and government. Towards this he laboured with unwearied patience, proving himself a great statesman, the shepherd of his people. Though the King was young in years—he was now thirty—he was old in experience, and the reforms made by him were to be solid and lasting.

Everywhere throughout the country, towns and villages lay in blackened ruins. No sooner had Alfred got rid of Guthrum and his army than he ordered the restoration of all the forts and strong places in Wessex. Well did he know that though the Danes who had settled in England under Guthrum might keep the peace for a time, there was constant danger that fresh swarms of invaders might arrive from Scandinavia.

In the very first winter after the peace of Wedmore had been made, an army of pagans under the sea-king Hastings wintered at Fulham, which was then a small village on the Thames. They were joined by many bold deserters from Guthrum's army, men who refused

## *King Alfred's Laws*

to lead a peaceful life. Fortunately, however, the greater number of the Danes remained quietly at Cirencester, and refused to join the unruly spirits. So the Danes at Fulham, seeing little chance of victory if they made another attack on Wessex, especially as the King was taking active measures for the defence of his kingdom, gave up the project and sailed for Ghent in Flanders.

Alfred sent to different countries in Europe for skilled masons and other workmen to instruct his people in making fortifications. Many wooden buildings were now replaced by stone ones, which were much stronger to resist the attacks of enemies than had been the old fortresses.

So the castles held by the King himself soon began to rise steadily from their ruins, rebuilt with all the newest improvements. But to persuade the nobles to undertake the rebuilding of their strongholds was no easy task. The Saxons, who were by nature sluggish and indolent, refused to see the necessity of setting to work, now that peace had been made with the Danes.

At first Alfred reasoned with them patiently, reproving their slowness and indifference. Though many were thus won over to his side, and induced to begin the work, others refused to proceed with it at all. When some years later another Danish invasion actually took place, the nobles who had refused to rebuild their castles bitterly regretted not having

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followed Alfred's advice, and confessed that he had been wiser than they.

On the whole, however, the work was well done, as was proved in the next Danish war. Then the enemy, instead of taking cities and castles at a rush as formerly, was obliged to lay siege to them. So well prepared were the Saxon garrisons by that time, that long before they were in danger of being forced to surrender, the King usually arrived with an army and delivered them.

Alfred's next task was the reform of the army. He drew up a list of the whole fighting force of his kingdom, and divided the men into three divisions. Of these, one division was constantly on duty day and night for one month. After that the men returned to their homes, and were replaced by the second division. At the end of the second month the third company relieved the second, who returned to their homes, where they spent two months until their time for service again came round. No military service was required of any man beyond three months in every year, so that in time of peace none of the companies were on duty during the three winter months. Of these on duty part were sent to guard the fortresses, while the others usually remained with the King as his body-guard, and were carefully drilled and instructed in military art. Some writers think that the King supported the company on duty out of his own purse.



## *King Alfred's Laws*

Alfred also increased the number of thanes or nobles, and decreed that all who possessed 400 acres of land might be raised to the rank of nobles at the royal pleasure. Merchants who had distinguished themselves by making three voyages overseas at their own cost might also be elevated to the rank of nobles. King Alfred further laboured to improve the navy of Wessex. He was determined that in case of another Danish invasion, the Saxons should be fully prepared to meet the enemy by sea, on which they were even more skilful and successful than on land.

Alfred ordered new vessels to be built from a model which he had designed himself. They were larger and higher than those of the Danes, and had forty, sixty, or sometimes even more oars. They were also steadier and swifter than the older vessels. Up to this time the King's fleet had been manned by sailors from many different nations, Italians, Franks, Greeks, and even Danes being engaged. Now, however, he caused Saxons to be trained as seamen. They were not long in acquiring great skill in the naval art, for their ancestors had been mighty seamen in ancient times.

In the year 882, some of the King's ships had an exciting adventure in the Channel. For several weeks four Danish pirate vessels had been hovering round the English coast, watching for a chance to land. The King hearing of this decided to swoop down on them suddenly with a few of his vessels. The pirates

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were taken completely by surprise, and made off as fast as they could. Alfred gave chase, and succeeded in capturing two of them. The commanders of the other two surrendered after a desperate struggle.

During the Danish wars all law and order had disappeared throughout the country. Thieves infested the roads, and none might venture abroad with safety after nightfall even in the towns and villages, for the law was powerless to protect honest men against robbery and murder. Even if the thieves were caught, it was often impossible for those who had been robbed to obtain justice, the judges being bribed by the thieves to side with them against the innocent.

Alfred was determined to put an end to this state of lawlessness, and to restore order and justice in his kingdom. He therefore made for his people a Code of Laws, copies of which still exist. The King was too wise to impose new laws on the Saxons. He only revised and improved those which had been in use in earlier times. He thus laid the foundation of our great British constitution, the growth of which, extending over many centuries, has moved slowly on until it is as strong as it is at this day. Alfred collected together in his Code whatever seemed right and good in the laws drawn up by the early kings, especially from those made by Ina of Wessex, Offa of Mercia, and Ethelbert, the first Christian King of Kent.

## *King Alfred's Laws*

Many of these laws had been derived from Pagan customs, but it was the King's aim to show all just law to be founded on the law of God, as made known to us in the Bible. His Code, therefore, begins with the Ten Commandments and contains many passages from the Bible. He also quotes Christ's own words: "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them;" and declares his belief that by this one command a man may test whether his acts be right, and need require no other law-book. The introduction to Alfred's Code closes with these words:—"I, Alfred, King of the West Saxons, showed these laws to all my Witan, and they all seemed good to them to hold."

In its attempt to give equal rights of justice to rich and poor, Alfred's Code showed a great advance on the laws formerly in use. The King also determined that justice should be rightly administered. Many unjust judges were dismissed by his orders from office, and some were even put to death.

Alfred found that many old aldermen who presided as judges over the shire courts were quite ignorant of the law. To one judge who confessed his ignorance the King said: "I am astonished at your great boldness, that you, who by God's favour and mine have been entrusted with the office and rank of a judge, should have neglected entirely the studies and labours of your calling. You must either resign your office, or apply yourself diligently, as I require of you to

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obtain wisdom." Thus many nobles and officers of high rank set themselves to be instructed like school-boys, by men much younger than themselves, rather than resign their positions.

Formerly fines had been imposed for nearly every offence, but when people were too poor to pay them there was no method of forcing them to do so. Alfred introduced the punishment of imprisonment for certain offences, which answered much better, though fines were still imposed when the accused persons could pay them.

When one man killed another, the kinsman of the murdered man was expected to seek out the murderer and slay him. One way out of this was for the murderer to pay wergeld, or the price of the murdered man, to his next of kin. After this sum was paid no further vengeance was taken on the murderer. The King had the highest wergeld. His life was valued at 120 pounds, equal to the value of six thanes, or thirty-six coerls or peasants.

When a man was accused of crime he might free himself by getting twelve men to swear to his innocence. Failing this, he was put to trial by ordeal, a curious ceremony, the observance of which continued until the reign of John, four hundred years after Alfred's time.

There were two kinds of ordeal. The fire ordeal required the accused person to take in his hand a red-hot iron of several pounds weight, or to walk

## *King Alfred's Laws*

barefoot and blindfold over red-hot ploughshares. If he could show at the end of a certain number of days that he had received no hurt, it was supposed that God had borne witness to his innocence.

The water ordeal consisted in plunging the bare arm into boiling water, or casting the accused person into a river or pond. If he floated without swimming he was declared guilty, as this showed the presence of an evil spirit, but if he sank he was acquitted. Trial by ordeal was conducted by the priests, who were often bribed by the accused person in order that he might come through it without injury. In cases when criminals could afford to pay a large sum, it is probable that neither the ploughshares nor the water were as hot as they appeared to be.

The following curious passages are taken from a list of penalties imposed by the King for certain offences:

‘If a man burn or hew another’s wood without leave let him pay for each great tree five shillings, and afterwards for each smaller tree as many as there be five pence, and thirty shillings in all.’

‘If anyone steal so that his wife or children know it not, let him pay forty shillings as penalty. But if he steal with the knowledge of all his household, let them go into slavery. A boy of ten may be privy to a theft. He that steals on Sundays, Easter, or on Holy Days, or during Lent, must pay a double fine.’

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‘If a dog bite or tear a man, for the first misdeed six shillings; for the second, twelve shillings; for the third, thirty shillings. If the dog do more misdeeds the man must go on paying, or else put away the dog.’

The result of Alfred’s labours to enforce justice was a great improvement in the character of his people. So firmly did he put down robbery that it was declared a traveller might lose his purse full of gold and find it untouched at the end of a month on the same spot; or that golden bracelets might be hung at the cross-roads, with confidence that no passer-by would dare to remove them.

## CHAPTER XIII: *The Danes Again*

**W**HILE Alfred thus nobly laboured for the good of his people by spreading new order and light throughout his kingdom the war clouds were again gathering.

During the years that England had enjoyed peace the Danes had overrun France and Flanders, bringing ruin and desolation to these countries. Hastings, the mighty sea-king, sailed up the Loire with a great fleet, and held the whole river in a state of blockade. Paris was also besieged, and though the city was not taken, the surrounding country was laid waste. At length King Louis III of France made a treaty of peace with Hastings, and the Danes consented to leave the neighbourhood. Some of them sailed to the mouth of the Rhine, near which they were defeated in two great battles by the troops of the Emperor Charles the Fat. The Danes then decided to leave these plundered districts and to seek others to which during their absence peace and prosperity had been restored.

Their army was accordingly divided into two parts, one of which proceeded to ravage the country that is now Belgium, while the other, accompanied by many horses, crossed the English Channel from Boulogne, and landed in Kent in the summer of 884. They then prepared to besiege Rochester

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

Castle, which was at that time an important fortress guarding the estuary of the river Medway. To defend themselves during the siege they began to build great fortifications, with huge mounds of earth for ramparts. This work occupied some time, for it was their intention, after taking the castle, to settle down in that part of Kent.

Meantime, however, the Saxon garrison within the castle defended themselves bravely, and succeeded in sending word to Alfred of the arrival of the Northmen. The King lost no time in hastening with all speed to Rochester at the head of an army.

As their defences were still unfinished, the Danes did not dare to make a stand against the English army, but fled to their ships and sailed away as fast as they could. Many unable to escape were taken prisoners, and a large number of horses also fell into the hands of the English.

The doors of the old Cathedral at Rochester, were afterwards covered with the skins of slain Danes, who had been robbers of churches, and are said to have been flayed alive by the English. Hundreds of years later, pieces of the Danes' skins still remained on the Cathedral doors.

Up to this time the Danes who had settled in East Anglia under Guthrum-Athelstan, had not joined the invaders, though King Alfred soon had reason to doubt their good faith. Of the Danes



## *The Danes Again*

given to Alfred as pledges of peace after the Treaty of Wedmore, several had died, and others had escaped to join their countrymen. So Alfred sent a message to Guthrum requesting that more Danes should be sent as hostages to take the place of those who had died or had deserted. Guthrum replied that they would be sent in due time, but many months passed, and he still delayed to comply with the King's request. This roused Alfred's suspicions, and he afterwards heard that friendly messages had passed between Guthrum and the leader of the Danish army, who had besieged Rochester.

It was not long before news reached Alfred that a number of the pirates who had fled from Rochester had landed at Benfleet, in Essex, where they had been joined by the Danes from East Anglia. The King was not greatly surprised to learn that Guthrum had broken faith with him. He knew well that the change from a wandering to a settled life, and, still more, the transformation of the old sea-robber's nature, could not be effected all at once.

So the whole navy of Wessex was ordered to assemble off the coast of East Anglia, in order to punish the King's faithless godson. Alfred sent a message to the commanders, ordering them to show no mercy to the traitors. At the mouth of the Stour, between Suffolk and Essex, the English encountered a fleet of sixteen Danish ships. A

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desperate sea-fight ensued, in which the Northmen were severely beaten, and many slain or drowned. Their vessels, containing much treasure, fell into the hands of the English.

The Wessex fleet, overjoyed by this great victory, were preparing to sail home with the booty when they were unexpectedly attacked by the treacherous Vikings of East Anglia, with a force much superior to their own. The Saxons fought long and desperately, but, being already exhausted by the former battle, they were defeated with great loss. The captured treasure was all retaken by the Danes.

Before long, however, another treaty of peace was made between Alfred and Guthrum. By this second treaty the boundaries of Alfred's kingdom were enlarged. The King then laid siege to London, which was still in the hands of the Danes. During the siege Alfred vowed that if the city fell into his hands he would send alms to Rome, and to the Churches in India. Soon after he had made this vow, which, as we shall hear later, he did not fail to keep, the city surrendered to him.

This was a very important gain, for it added much to the King's power, and made him more than ever the real head of the whole English nation. All the English, who were not in subjection to the Danes, now submitted to him.

London had been an important trade centre even



"ALFRED RIDING THROUGH THE RUINS OF LONDON"



## *The Danes Again*

in Roman times. After the landing of the English tribes in Britain its importance declined, for, as we have seen, they had a distaste for living in walled towns. By the seventh century, however, it had again become the chief port of the south-east, and in 604 Ethelbert, King of Kent, persuaded Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, to consecrate a bishop named Mellitus to the see of London. From that time Christianity and trade combined to make the city important.

Ethelbert built the Church of St Paul, and though it has been rebuilt more than once, we know that from his time to the present, a period of 1300 years, a great church, dedicated to the Apostle Paul, has looked down on London from Ludgate Hill.

In 851 London was taken by the Danes, who made it a favourite landing and starting-place for their expeditions. From that time until it was retaken by Alfred its trade steadily declined. Foreign merchants ceased to visit the famous port, and the population dwindled away. The wealthier inhabitants fled to foreign lands, while the poorer departed to seek safety in the country.

When King Alfred rode through the streets of the city soon after it had surrendered to him, he saw on every hand ruined churches, roofless houses, narrow grass-grown streets, and lanes choked with

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heaps of rubbish. Many dead bodies had been left unburied in the houses or in the open streets, where they had fallen fighting.

The scene of desolation was enough to strike dismay into the stoutest heart. Yet Alfred determined that no time should be lost in setting to work to restore the city. Large gangs of workmen were employed to clear away the rubbish, and soon new towers and houses began to rise from the ruins. The walls and fortifications of London were also restored on a grander scale than before. The King placed in the city a garrison of soldiers, to whom he granted lands for their support. The new city, with its fortified walls and towers, thus became a barrier to the passage of pirate ships up the Thames.

Before many years had passed, merchants of all nations flocked to the city. Two colonies of Danes were permitted to settle there—one south of the Thames in the district that is now Southwark; the other on the north bank of the river, where they had a burial place, supposed to be near the site of the church still dedicated to St Clement Danes, the patron saint of seamen.

In 886 Alfred appointed as governor of London, his son-in-law, Ethelred, Alderman of Mercia, the husband of his daughter, Ethelfleda.

Thus King Alfred laid the foundations of the wealth and prosperity of that great city which

## *The Danes Again*

was destined to become in our days the commercial capital of the world.

In 890 Guthrum, the old sea-robber, died, and was buried at Thetford, in Norfolk. But the Danes of East Anglia made no movement to break the peace which continued to reign in England.

## CHAPTER XIV: *King Alfred's Friends*

**K**ING ALFRED had many friends among the poor as well as among the rich. Prince, noble and peasant, rough mariner, studious monk or cunning craftsman, all were the same to him so long as they showed themselves to be men of worth. Many poor but deserving men were enriched by him, and placed in positions of trust. He was also a generous friend to monks and priests, and to all his household servants, for whose welfare he cared as if they had been his own children.

One of the King's chief friends was the Welsh monk, Asser, a man of great learning and earnest piety. His fame as a scholar having reached Wessex, Alfred sent messengers to Wales to invite him to the court. Asser hastened to obey the summons, and set out with an honourable escort provided by the King. He found Alfred at the royal castle of Dean, near Chichester, in Sussex, and there he received a kindly and honourable welcome.

After talking with him for some time Alfred was so pleased with his learning that he begged him to remain at the court for the rest of his life, offering, if he would do so, to promote him to great honour in the Church. Asser, however, loved his native country, Wales, and the friends he had left there, and was unwilling to agree to the King's proposal.

"I cannot promise what you ask," he said, "for



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it seems to me that it would be ungrateful for the sake of earthly honour to leave the place where I have lived and worked from my youth, and the friends from whom I have received so much kindness."

"Will you, then, spend six months of the year in Wales, and the other six months at the West Saxon court?" asked the King.

"I cannot make even this promise, O King," said Asser, "without first consulting my friends."

After remaining for four days as the guest of the King, Asser set out on his homeward way. But he got no farther than Winchester, where he was attacked with fever, and lay for many weeks seriously ill. At first there seemed little hope that he could recover, but at length he began slowly to regain health. So weak did the fever leave him, that it was more than a year before he was able to continue his journey.

Meantime King Alfred, who had heard nothing of Asser's illness, wondered much why he did not return as he had promised. At last the King sent a messenger to Wales to make inquiries concerning the scholar. The messenger learned from Asser's friends of his serious illness, and also found that they approved of the King's proposal that Asser should spend six months of the year in Wessex. They knew that through his influence with the King he would be the better able to protect the churches and monasteries in Wales.

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As soon as Asser was able to travel, he joined the King in Wessex, at a royal castle called Leoneford. Before long he became the King's constant companion and trusted counsellor. So unwilling was Alfred to allow him to depart, and so much did he value his services, that on this first occasion Asser remained at the court for eight months.

At length, when Christmas was near, he begged the King earnestly for leave to return to Wales. It was not, however, until Christmas Eve that the King sent for him, and gave him permission to depart. At the same time he handed him a paper, and ordered him to read the writing thereon. Asser did so, and learned that the King had granted him for life the monasteries of Amesbury, in Wiltshire, and Banwell, in Somerset. To these the King afterwards added a parish near Exeter.

In the later years of the King's reign Asser became one of the most powerful churchmen in Wessex, and after Alfred's death was made Bishop of Selborne. He wrote a life of King Alfred, and it is from this famous work that we get most of our knowledge concerning the great King.

Another eminent scholar, who became an intimate friend of King Alfred, was Plegmund, Archbishop of Canterbury. He was by birth a Mercian, and had become a monk at an early age. In 876 his monastery was sacked and plundered by the Danes. Plegmund narrowly escaped being assassinated, and took refuge

## *King Alfred's Friends*

in a part of Cheshire which was then an island, five miles north-east from Chester. This island, afterwards called from his name Plegmundham, now forms the parish of Plemonstall, and is said to have been given by King Ethelwulf to Christ Church, Canterbury. There Plegmund lived as a hermit for fourteen years.

Alfred, hearing of Plegmund's piety, summoned him to the court, and a few months after his arrival made him Archbishop of Canterbury. In those days it was the custom for archbishops, after their election, to go to Rome to be consecrated by the Pope; so Plegmund set out on the long journey to the Eternal City. On his arrival he found that a new Pope named Formosus had just been elected.

By Formosus, Plegmund was duly consecrated in the great Church of St Peter, and received from him the pall, a white woollen scarf embroidered with purple crosses, worn by archbishops. After his consecration Plegmund returned to England, and soon proved himself a good and worthy Archbishop. Much of his time was spent with the King, and he helped Alfred to translate from Latin into Anglo-Saxon *The Shepherd's Book*, a collection of rules for bishops written by Pope Gregory the Great.

About six years after Plegmund's consecration as Archbishop, strange news reached England from Rome. Pope Formosus had died in the previous year. He was succeeded by Pope Stephen VI, who

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had been his mortal enemy, and who declared that Formosus had been no true Pope but a usurper. Stephen therefore ordered the dead body of Pope Formosus to be dug up, after it had lain in the grave for nine months, in order that it might be solemnly judged before a council of bishops.

The corpse, dressed in pontifical robes, was placed on a throne, and a deacon was appointed to act as counsel for the defence. In the presence of the assembled bishops and nobles Stephen thus addressed the dead Pope.

“Why didst thou, tempted by ambition, dare to usurp the Apostolic See?”

The deacon who was to have defended the dead Pope was too terrified to make any reply. Pope Stephen accordingly ordered the body to be stripped of its sacred vestments. The three fingers of the right hand, with which popes are wont to bestow the blessing, were cut off, and the body was thrown into the river Tiber. It was then decreed that all who had been consecrated by Formosus were no true bishops or archbishops, and must either be driven from their sees or seek reconsecration from Pope Stephen.

The news of the passing of this decree caused much sorrow and consternation in England, not only to King Alfred, but to all the people of Wessex. For it meant that their faithful Plegmund might no longer remain Archbishop of Canterbury. King Alfred

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called a meeting of the Witan, at which Plegmund was present, and the matter was earnestly discussed. At length it was decided that Plegmund must again set out for Rome. But as Alfred could ill spare his friend, it was decided to postpone his departure for a time.

It was not until after King Alfred's death that Plegmund again made the long journey to Rome. This time he went with a sorrowful heart, for he knew not how he might be received by the Pope, or if he would ever again return to his people as their Archbishop.

A few days after his arrival in Rome, Plegmund was admitted to the presence of the new Pope. In trembling tones he told how he had made the long journey at the desire of the King and people of Wessex, hoping that the Pope might consent to reconsecrate him Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Pope listened courteously to Plegmund's speech, and, struck by his noble and worthy bearing, readily consented to reconsecrate him Archbishop.

On his return to England, Plegmund received a warm welcome from King Edward, the son of Alfred, and from the people of Wessex and Kent. A great procession met him on his arrival, and accompanied him to Canterbury. Plegmund brought with him the relics of the famous Saint Blaise, which he had bought in Italy for a large sum of money. The Archbishop lived to a good old age, much beloved by

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

King and people. He died in 914 and was buried in Canterbury Cathedral.

Werferth, Bishop of Worcester, was another in the band of scholars whom the great King gathered around him. Soon after his consecration as bishop, Werferth had been driven from his see by the Danes, and escaped to Gaul, where he lived for some years. When peace had been restored in England, King Alfred sent a message to Werferth inviting him to return. The Bishop gladly accepted the King's invitation, and soon after his arrival he was raised to a position of importance in the royal household. He laboured with the King to restore learning in Wessex, and to reform the monasteries. Among other works which Werferth translated at the King's command from Latin to Anglo-Saxon was the "Dialogues" of Pope Gregory the Great. Copies of Werferth's translation still exist at Oxford and at Cambridge.

An old Saxon priest named John was also invited by Alfred to come from the Abbey of Corbey, in Westphalia, to settle in Wessex. He had been one of Alfred's teachers in boyhood, and the King knew him to be a strict disciplinarian, but very honest and trustworthy. John became the King's mass priest, and later was chosen Abbot of the great monastery built by Alfred at Athelney, of which we shall hear later.

The fame of Grimbold, a priest of St. Omers, in

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France, having reached Alfred, he resolved to invite him to Wessex. Grimbald was skilled in music, very learned in the Holy Scriptures, and in all Church doctrine and discipline. The King believed that he would be specially fitted to help in restoring order in the monasteries and churches. As Grimbald was under the authority of the famous Fulk, Archbishop of Rheims, Alfred sent an embassy of clergy and laymen with presents to Fulk, begging that the priest might be sent to England.

The quaintly expressed letter sent by Fulk in reply to Alfred still exists. The Archbishop appears to have been much pleased by Alfred's request that a learned priest should be sent from Rheims, and declares that his see has always been famous for its scholars. He praises Alfred's zeal for the Church, and prays that God may multiply peace in the King's realm, and that religion and learning, which had fallen into decay during the Danish wars, may be speedily restored. Fulk then thanks Alfred for his gifts, which included a number of valuable hounds.

"You have sent me," he writes, "some very noble and faithful hounds, asking me in return to send you spiritual hounds or priests, who, by their watchfulness will drive away evil spirits from the souls of men."

He then declares his willingness to send Grimbald, who will be to the King a spiritual watch-dog.

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On his arrival in England, Grimbald was kindly welcomed by King Alfred. After spending some months with the King, he was appointed professor in one of the new schools built by Alfred. Later, Grimbald was made abbot of the new monastery at Winchester, and his fame as a scholar spread throughout Europe.



## CHAPTER XV: *Travellers' Tales*

**K**ING ALFRED delighted in listening to the tales of mariners who came from far countries. At his court there lived for some time two famous explorers named Wulfstan and Othere. Both these men gave the King accounts of their travels, which he carefully wrote down and preserved.

Wulfstan was a Jutlander who had made a voyage to the Baltic Sea, sailing from Schleswig, in Denmark, to Truso, in Prussia. In the course of his expedition he became acquainted with Othere and afterwards went with him to England. Wulfstan told Alfred that he had gone from Schleswig to Truso in seven days, visiting on the way Gothland and many other wonderful islands.

He afterwards explored the mouth of the river Vistula, near which lived a tribe of people called the Esthonians. In these regions each town had a king of its own. The kings and rich men drank mares' milk, and the poor people and slaves drank mead, which was made from wheat and honey.

The Esthonians burned their dead instead of burying them. The bodies of very rich people often remained unburnt for many months, because the Esthonians knew how to preserve them from corruption by means of ice. They could make ice

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even in summer, and all the wealthy people had ice houses for this purpose.

During the time that a body lay unburnt, there was much drinking and feasting, the money of the dead man being used to pay for the festivities. At length, on the day fixed for the burning, all the money and treasure left in the house was divided into five or six portions. These were placed at different distances, the largest portion being about a mile distant from the house, and the others in order nearer, the smallest being nearest the house. Then all the men who lived within five or six miles of the dwelling of the dead man assembled with their swiftest horses. Starting from an appointed place, they all rode as fast as they could toward the treasure. He who had the swiftest horse got the first and largest portion, and the rest in order, till it was all taken. Because of this strange custom swift horses were very dear among the Esthonians. After the race for the treasure, the body of the dead man was brought out and burnt with all his weapons and clothes.

Othere, the other navigator, whose tales were also written down by King Alfred, was a wealthy Norse whale-fisher from Halgoland, in Norway. Of all Norsemen he dwelt farthest to the north. The only other inhabitants of the district surrounding his home were the Finns, who came thither for fishing in the summer and for hunting in the winter. Once he

## *Travellers' Tales*

had explored the region farther north, but found that it was barren and uninhabited.

To the north-east dwelt the Lapps, who often made war on the Norsemen. They had small light boats, which they carried overland into the meres and seas. Othere said that inland, his country was very mountainous, and all the land that could be ploughed or pastured lay near the sea-shore. He was the richest man in that part of Norway, for he had much land and many reindeer. These animals supplied all his wants, for they give milk like cows, and can be trained to draw sledges. Their flesh is used for food, and their skin for clothing.

Othere had three kinds of reindeer, tame, wild, and decoy. The decoy reindeer, of which he had six, were used for catching others. He allowed them to roam freely in the forests. When they returned of their own accord to the stables for food, wild reindeer often followed them, and were thus easily captured.

Much of Othere's wealth consisted of tribute paid by the Finns in skins of animals, birds' feathers, whalebone, and ropes made of whales' hides and of seals'. The Finns paid according to their rank; the best born had to pay yearly fifteen martens' skins, five reindeers', one bear and one otter, and two ships' ropes each 120 feet long.

From childhood Othere had been accustomed to brave the waves of the stormy North Sea and

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

was fearless of its dangers. He related to King Alfred the story of a famous voyage he had made from Halgoland round the North Cape into the White Sea. On this voyage he was the first to discover the route to Russia by the North Cape of Norway.

Othere's purpose in sailing northward was to hunt for walruses, which abound even to this day in the White Sea around Archangel, and on the shores of the country where dwelt a tribe called the Biarmians (now the Permians). These people told Othere many wonderful tales of their own and of neighbouring lands, but he thought the stories too strange to be true.

He caught many walruses, some fourteen feet long, with huge ivory tusks. Othere had brought some walrus tusks as a gift to King Alfred. On that same voyage he caught many great whales, some of which were 160 feet long. Othere declared to King Alfred that he and the five men who were with him had killed sixty large whales in two days.

After his return from this voyage, Othere made another exploring voyage to the Bay of Christiania, now known as the Skager Rack. Thence he sailed to Schleswig, visiting on the way many islands around Denmark.

King Alfred listened to these tales with great interest and pleasure. He afterwards copied them





## *Travellers' Tales*

into a book, in which he had written an Anglo-Saxon translation of a History of the World. This History had been written in Latin in the fifth century by a priest named Orosius. Copies of Alfred's book, containing the narratives of Othere and Wulfstan still exist (See Chapter XVI).

The following poem by Longfellow tells in stirring verse the wonderful adventures of Othere:

### *THE DISCOVERER OF THE NORTH CAPE*

*(A leaf from King Alfred's "Orosius.")*

*Othere the old sea captain,  
Who dwelt in Halgoland,  
To King Alfred the Lover of Truth  
Brought a snow-white walrus tooth;  
Which he held in his brown right hand.*

*His figure was tall and stately;  
Like a boy's his eye appeared;  
His hair was yellow as hay,  
But threads of a silver-grey  
Gleamed in his tawny beard.*

*Hearty and hale was Othere;  
His cheek had the colour of oak;  
With a kind of laugh in his speech  
Like the sea-tide on a beach,  
As unto the King he spoke.*

# *The Story of Alfred the Great*

*And Alfred, King of the Saxons,  
Had a book upon his knees,  
And wrote down the wondrous tale  
Of him who was first to sail  
Into the Arctic Seas.*

*“So far I live to the northward  
No man lives north of me.  
To the east are wild mountain chains,  
And beyond them meres and plains;  
To the westward all is sea.*

*“So far I live to the northward  
From the harbour of Skiringes-hale,  
If you only sail by day,  
With a fair wind all the way,  
More than a month would you sail.*

*“I own six hundred reindeer,  
With sheep and swine beside;  
I have tribute from the Finns—  
Whalebone and reindeer skins,  
And ropes of walrus-hide.*

*“I ploughed the land with horses,  
But my heart was ill at ease,  
For the old sea-faring men  
Came to me now and then  
With their sagas of the seas;—*



## *Travellers' Tales*

*“Of Iceland and of Greenland,  
And the stormy Hebrides,  
And the undiscovered deep;  
Oh I could not eat or sleep  
For thinking of these seas!*

*“To the northward stretched the desert  
How far I fain would know;  
So at last I sallied forth,  
And three days sailed due north  
As far as the whale-ships go.*

*“To the west of me was the ocean,  
To the east the desolate shore:  
But I did not slacken sail  
For the walrus or the whale  
Till after three days more.*

*“The days grew longer and longer,  
Till they became as one;  
And northward through the haze  
I saw the sullen blaze  
Of the red midnight sun.*

*“And then uprose before me  
Upon the waters' edge;  
The huge and haggard shape  
Of that unknown North Cape,  
Whose form is like a wedge.*

# *The Story of Alfred the Great*

*"The sea was rough and stormy,  
The tempest howled and wailed;  
And the sea-fog like a ghost,  
Haunted that dreary coast  
But onward still I sailed.*

*"Four days I steered to eastward,  
Four days without a night;  
Round in a fiery ring  
Went the great sun, O king,  
With red and lurid light."*

*Here Alfred, King of the Saxons  
Ceased writing for a while,  
And raised his eyes from his book  
With a strange and puzzled look  
And an incredulous smile.*

*But Othere the old sea-captain,  
He neither paused nor stirred,  
Till the king listened, and then  
Once more took up his pen,  
And wrote down every word.*

*"And now the land," said Othere,  
"Bent southward suddenly;  
And I followed the southward shore,  
And ever southward bore  
Into a nameless sea.*

## *Travellers' Tales*

*"And there we hunted the walrus,  
The narwhale and the seal,  
Ha! 'twas a noble game,  
And like the lightning's flame  
Flew our harpoons of steel.*

*'There were six of us altogether.  
Norsemen of Halgoland;  
In two days and no more  
We killed of them threescore  
And dragged them to the strand."*

*Here Alfred the Truth Teller  
Suddenly closed his book,  
And lifted his blue eyes  
With doubt and strange surmise  
Depicted in their look.*

*And Othere the old sea-captain  
Stared at him wild and weird,  
Then smiled till his shining teeth  
Gleamed white from underneath  
His tawny, quivering beard.*

*And to the King of the Saxons,  
In witness of the truth,  
Raising his noble head,  
He stretched his brown hand and said,  
"Behold this walrus tooth."*

## CHAPTER XVI: *King Alfred's Monasteries*

THE destruction of the great English monasteries by the Danes was a serious loss to the whole country. At that time the monasteries were not only the true homes of art, science, and learning of all kinds, but were also places of shelter for the sick and needy. To every large monastery a school and hospital were attached, also farm-lands and orchards. There the good monks worked, leading prayerful and unselfish lives, devoted to learning, to the teaching of the young, and to the care of the sick. When the monks and nuns were slain by the cruel sea-robbers, or driven to seek refuge in other lands, learning declined throughout the whole of England. Even at the beginning of his reign King Alfred, whose great desire it was that the English should be better educated, was distressed to find so few scholars in the country who could read Latin, the language in which nearly all books were written at that time.

Alfred had therefore no sooner got rid of the Danes, than he set himself to restore the old monasteries and to build new ones. The first monastery which Alfred built was at Athelney in Somersetshire; on the very spot where in the dark days before Ethandune, he had sought refuge from the Danes.

## *King Alfred's Monasteries*

The story of St Cuthbert's appearing in a dream to the King at Athelney has already been told. It is said that after this dream, the King vowed that if his crown and kingdom were indeed restored to him he would build a monastery on the spot which had been endeared to him by so many wonderful experiences.

Before the work could be begun, an army of workmen was sent by the King to build a great bridge across the marshes. At the end of the bridge was erected a strong tower of beautiful workmanship to guard the approach to the monastery. The monastery itself with the outbuildings, when completed, covered the whole of the island, and was built entirely of wood. A small wooden church of curious form was attached to it. Four strong pillars of wood were sunk deeply into the swampy ground. Upon them were placed four arches of circular form, upon which rested the church. The church and monastery of Athelney were dedicated by King Alfred to our Blessed Saviour, and to St Peter and St Paul.

The King had at first much difficulty in persuading monks to live at Athelney, for the spot was damp, gloomy, and unhealthy. During the long wars, too, Englishmen had become so accustomed to the excitement of military life that they had now little desire to turn monks. So Alfred was obliged to send to foreign countries for monks and scholars to people

# *The Story of Alfred the Great*

his monastery. The greater number came from France and from Germany. Many English boys were also sent there by the King to be educated until they were old enough to become monks. Among them was a young Danish lad, the son of heathen parents, who was one of the most promising scholars in the school.

Alfred chose as Abbot of Athelney the old Saxon priest John, of whom we have already heard. Poor John had a hard time trying to keep order among the unruly foreign monks, who were constantly quarrelling with each other. In that distant island, hemmed in by swamp and forest, there were no farm lands for the monks to till, and no playgrounds for the boys; so the Abbot was often puzzled to find employment for those under him, though he realized that plenty of work was the best remedy for their jealousies and disputes.

John had lived for some years at the German abbey of Corbey in Westphalia, and was therefore inclined to favour the German monks. This roused bitter anger among the Frenchmen. At length two French monks, the one a priest and the other a deacon, being greatly incensed against the Abbot, plotted to bring about his death. They persuaded two French servants, by promise of great rewards, to carry out their wicked scheme.

It was the custom of the good Abbot John to spend some hours each night at prayer alone in the church.

## *King Alfred's Monasteries*

The assassins therefore planned to conceal themselves in the church by night to wait the coming of the Abbot, and to slay him as he knelt in prayer before the altar. They were then to drag his body from the church, and throw it down before a house where lived some people of evil repute, so that the other monks might suppose their Abbot had been slain while on a visit to that house.

On the night fixed for this dreadful deed the two armed ruffians concealed themselves in the dimly lit church. Soon after midnight the Abbot entered. Supposing the church to be empty, as was usual at that hour, he knelt reverently in prayer before the altar, near which burned a solitary lamp.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a loud shout, and the two armed assassins rushed on the Abbot with drawn swords. Though John was taken completely by surprise he was a brave man, and in his youth had been trained in the art of self-defence. He sprang to his feet and grappled with the Frenchmen, shouting lustily. The monks, hearing his cries, rushed into the church, but John was severely wounded before they could come to his help, and the ruffians escaped, leaving him half-dead.

The monks raised the old Abbot, and with many tears and lamentations conveyed him in a fainting condition to his cell. Meantime the two treacherous Frenchmen, who had hired the assassins, made more show of weeping than all the others. Abbot

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John did not die, however. For many weeks he was carefully tended by the monks who remained faithful to him, and, thanks to their care, slowly recovered strength. Some time afterwards the two French monks were discovered to have been at the bottom of the wicked design, and were thrown into prison. While there they confessed their guilt, and were both put to death.

The monastery of Athelney continued to exist for four hundred years after the time of King Alfred, although owing to its unhealthy situation it was less successful than the other monasteries founded by him. In the thirteenth century it was abandoned by the monks, and gradually fell into ruins. No trace of the building now remains in Athelney.

King Alfred also founded an abbey for nuns at Shaftesbury in Dorsetshire. Long before the Romans came to our country there had been a British settlement at Shaftesbury, but the place had gradually ceased to be inhabited. Alfred first built a town there on the top of a hill, overlooking the beautiful valley of Blackmore. In 888, the abbey for nuns was built near the east gate of the city, and so close to the southern edge of the cliff that afterwards it had to be walled up from below to prevent a landslide.

King Alfred had no difficulty in finding nuns to fill the abbey, for many noble ladies soon expressed a desire to enter it. There they spent peaceful lives,



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busy on their beautiful needlework, or in tending the sick, and in prayer.

The first Abbess of Shaftesbury was Ethelgeda, King Alfred's second daughter. She had become a nun when very young, and was probably not more than sixteen when she was chosen Abbess. The King granted many lands for the support of Shaftesbury Abbey and also one-eighth of the royal revenues.

The famous abbey of New Minster at Winchester was also founded by Alfred, but was unfinished at the time of his death. It was built in the churchyard to the north side of Winchester Cathedral. The chapel of the abbey was so near the Cathedral Church that the chanting of the one choir could be distinctly heard by the other. This led to a quarrel between the Bishop of Winchester and the Abbot of the monastery. After the death of Alfred, his son and successor, King Edward the Elder, wished to purchase more ground for the building of the abbey. The Bishop of Winchester, who was still provoked by his quarrel with the Abbot, insisted on the King's paying one gold mark for every foot of land which he required.

King Alfred chose his friend Grimbald to be first Abbot of the New Minster, but Grimbald died in 903, the year in which the abbey was completed. The abbey remained on its first site within the Cathedral churchyard for two hundred years. It

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was then removed to a place called Hyde outside the city walls, whence it obtained the name of Hyde Abbey, and was famous until the Reformation.

King Alfred was a generous benefactor to the ancient abbeys of Glastonbury and Wilton, and to the Cathedrals of Durham and Sherborne. The history of the famous old abbey of Glastonbury in Somerset is full of romance. At Glastonbury was the first Christian church built in this country. According to an ancient legend, Joseph of Arimathea, with eleven companions, landed in Britain in the year A.D. 63. They were well received by a British king named Arviragus, and were allowed to settle in a small island in Somerset surrounded by marshes and known as Glassy Island, from the colour of the stream which surrounded it. The place was afterwards called Avalon probably from the Welsh word 'aval' or apple, in which fruit it abounded.

Here Joseph erected in honour of the Virgin Mary the first Christian church in England, made of wreathed twigs. A monastery was afterwards founded there by Irish scholars.

Another old story tells how, about the year 542, the famous British king, Arthur, being mortally wounded in the battle of Camlam was carried to the monastery at Glastonbury and there breathed his last. He is said to have been buried in the monks' cemetery. Five hundred and forty years later, some monks while digging there found what they

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believed to be his sepulchre. They conveyed his relics into the church and there buried them. The common tradition was that King Arthur had suffered only a temporary death, and would come again to resume his sceptre.

Alfred's good Queen, Elswitha, also founded a house for nuns at Winchester, known as the Convent of St Mary. Before the end of Alfred's reign the English monasteries had again become famous as places of learning, and many scholars from distant lands came thither to seek instruction in the schools. King Alfred also established a school for the young nobles at his court, and frequently went there himself to superintend the instruction given. His own children were educated there. It is probable that as the court moved from place to place this school moved with it.

The King made it a custom to send friendly embassies every year to Rome bearing gifts to the Pope. With them he also sent the money promised by his father, Ethelwulf, for the Church of St Peter. In 882, Pope Marinus I sent in return a valuable gift to King Alfred. This was nothing less than a piece of what was believed to be the true cross on which Christ suffered. In the following year, Alfred sent two nobles named Sighelm and Athelstane to Rome to thank the Pope for this wonderful gift, and also to request that the Saxon school in Rome, which had been rebuilt by King Ethelwulf, should

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be freed from taxation. This request the Pope granted.

According to a quaint old story, about the year 891 three pilgrims set out in a boat, without any oars, from Ireland, 'whence they had stolen because they desired to be in a state of pilgrimage for the love of God.' The boat in which they sailed was made of two hides and a half, and they took with them food for seven days. Trusting themselves to God's guidance they let their boat drift westward, and on the seventh day came to land in Cornwall. Leaving their frail bark on the shore, they hastened to Alfred, King of the West Saxons, who received them with much kindness. When they had told him that they desired to continue their pilgrimage to Rome and Jerusalem he gave them letters to the rulers of the countries through which they were to pass, commanding that none should harm or molest them on the way. Only one of them lived to return home. He is said to have brought a letter and present to King Alfred from Abel, the patriarch of Jerusalem.

We have seen that during the siege of London Alfred made a vow to send alms to the Church in India if the city fell into his hands. There had been Christian churches in India from a very early date. According to an old legend, the apostle St Thomas journeyed as far as Mylapur, now a suburb of Madras, to preach the gospel, and there suffered martyrdom. His shrine, which was rebuilt by the

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Portuguese in the sixteenth century, is still to be seen there on the top of Mount St Thomas.

Alfred's ambassadors reached the distant land, and were well received by the Christians of India. Of their long and wonderful journey we unfortunately know nothing, though this is the first record of communication between England and the great Indian Empire over which Britain now rules. The ambassadors came back to Alfred after a long absence, bringing with them precious stones and spices in return for his alms. These gifts Alfred distributed among his Cathedral churches, where they were preserved for many years.

## CHAPTER XVII: *King Alfred's Books*

ONE of King Alfred's greatest achievements was that he left to his people at the end of his reign, the precious legacy of the best books which then existed, translated for the first time into the English language.

The King knew that if his country was to be truly great the people must make progress in knowledge as well as in the art of war. But as all the learned books of that time were written in Latin, he decided that part of his work of reform should be to translate some of the best and most useful into the English tongue.

Asser tells how Alfred's first book came to be written. One day after the King and Asser had talked together for some time on various matters, Asser read aloud to the King a passage from a certain Latin book. The passage pleased Alfred so much that he took from his bosom a book which he always carried there, and asked Asser to copy the words therein. He could not, however, find a single blank page in the book, for it was already filled with the daily lessons, psalms, and prayers which the King had learned in his youth. Asser therefore proposed to begin a new book, and to this the King agreed. Very soon other quotations were added to the first, and the new book grew, till it was as large as a

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psalter. It was filled chiefly with passages from the Scriptures, and from the Latin writings of the Fathers of the Church. The King called it his *Handbook*. It was begun in November 887, and in the following year he translated it into English for the use of his people. To those who could not read Latin this was a great boon, and the King soon decided to translate other books into English. Unfortunately the *Handbook* was lost after Alfred's death, and nothing is now known of its fate.

With the assistance of Plegmund, Archbishop of Canterbury, King Alfred next undertook the translation of Pope Gregory's *Shepherd's Book*, or *Pastoral Care*, of which mention was made in a previous chapter. This book sets forth the duties of Christian bishops, the importance of their office, and the great danger of filling it unworthily. To the *Shepherd's Book* the King wrote an important preface addressed to his friend Bishop Werferth, in which he gives an account of the different causes of the falling away of learning in England at that time. Alfred ordered copies of his translation to be sent to all the bishops in his kingdom. The copies sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury and to the Bishops of Worcester and Sherborne are still in existence.

The King desired that his people should have some knowledge of how Christianity was first introduced into England, and also of the history of their

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own and other countries. So the next book which he translated into English was Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. The Venerable Bede, as he was called, who first wrote this book in Latin, was a monk of the monastery of Wearmouth, near Jarrow, in Durham. Having been left an orphan when very young, Bede had been sent to the monastery at the age of seven. With the exception of a few visits to friends in the neighbourhood, he remained in the monastery all his life, and died there, at the age of sixty-three, in the year 735.

His wonderful writings were the result of hard study. Bede loved to be always learning, teaching, or writing. He studied the Scriptures with all his might, and never failed to take part in the daily services of the church. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* begins with the landing of Julius Cæsar in Britain, and continues to the year 731. It is a work of the greatest value, for from it we learn how England became a Christian country. There we read of the landing in England of the Roman monk Augustine, who afterwards became first Archbishop of Canterbury; of his favourable reception by King Ethelbert of Kent and Queen Bertha, who was a Christian princess from Gaul; and of the gradual spread of Christianity from Kent to other parts of England. There, too, we read many wonderful stories of the Early English saints, and of



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how Cædmon, a poor cowherd at Whitby monastery, became the first Anglo-Saxon poet.

Great must have been the delight of the English people when, through the labours of their King, they were first able to read these stories in their own tongue.

King Alfred also caused all that was known of the history of England up to his own time to be copied from old records. It had been the custom in monasteries to keep a register of the events of each year, chiefly the deaths or dethronements of bishops and kings. For Wessex and Kent this was done at Winchester and Canterbury. The Winchester record was most carefully kept. In the reign of King Ethelwulf, a cleric, who is supposed to have been Bishop Swithin of Winchester, filled in the Winchester annals with more details, inserting all that was known from tradition, from the time of the first landing of the English in Britain. He also made a table showing the supposed descent of the West Saxon Kings from Adam and from the god Odin or Woden. This part of the record, continued to the year 855, was found by Alfred when he became King, and remained as it was until the days of peace. About the year 891 Alfred determined to continue it as a history of England.

Thus the famous *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was begun, and was continued after Alfred's death by various writers for nearly three hundred years.

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From it we get most of our knowledge of our country's early history. Alfred caused the part from the ascension of his brother Ethelbald to be carefully filled in, and added a full account of the Danish wars. Many fresh entries were also made from different Latin writers, and the whole *Chronicle* was translated into English. Six ancient copies of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* are still in existence. Four of these may be seen in the British Museum.

The translation into English of the *History of the World*, by Orosius, was probably the most difficult of all Alfred's literary labours. This book had been written in Latin about the year 418 by Orosius, a young Spanish priest. Many heathen writers of that time had declared that the introduction of Christianity had harmed the Roman Empire more than it had benefited it. In reply to this statement, St Augustine, the African Bishop of Hippo, had written a book called *The City of God*, in which he defended the Christian faith. He then advised his friend Orosius to write a History of the World. The book was an attempt to prove, as Augustine himself had done, that the decay of the Roman Empire and the wars of the world were not due, as the heathen declared, to Christianity.

This work of Orosius was the only History of the World existing in the Middle Ages, and though poorly written, contains much useful information. In translating the book, Alfred omitted much which

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he thought would not be of interest to his readers. He also inserted many new facts, including the story of the voyages of Othere and Wulfstan, of which an account has already been given, and a description of the German countries from which the English races first came.

Another very important book translated by King Alfred was the *Consolations of Philosophy*, by Boethius. It was written about the year 523 by Boethius, a learned Roman consul, who had enjoyed the favour of Theodoric, King of the Goths, then Master of Italy and Rome. In 522, Boethius was accused of treason by Theodoric, and was thrown into prison at Pavia. After being kept in a dungeon for nearly a year, he was executed.

Like Bunyan, he employed the months of his imprisonment in writing this book, in which he supposes that he is visited in prison by Wisdom or Philosophy, disguised as a woman. She consoles him for the evil changes of fortune, and shows that riches, power, pleasure, or glory do not bring their possessors real happiness, but that the only lasting happiness is in the soul. Virtue alone is of importance, for the good man is master of himself and of his fate.

None knew better than King Alfred how true this is, and the *Consolations* was one of his favourite books. In translating it for the use of his people he inserted many of his own thoughts, and this

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makes his English version of the greatest interest. From this work we learn something of the King's inner life, and of his noble thoughts. In the second part of the book Alfred explains at great length his own ideas about government, and shows how vain is power without wisdom. He ends this part with the memorable words:—"This I can truly say that as long as I have lived I have striven to live worthily, and after my death to leave to my descendants a memory of me in good works."

The book contains many fine passages and several stories of great interest. Among them is the following old Greek legend:—

"Once upon a time there lived in the country called Thracia, a harper named Orpheus. So skillfully could he harp that the wild beasts of the forest were wont to come together at the sound of his music, and though men or hounds came against them they would not flee. And the woods swayed and the rocks stirred in time to his melodies.

"The harper had a beautiful wife named Eurydice, whom he loved very dearly. But it came to pass that Eurydice died, and her soul was taken to the Spirit-Land. Then the harper became so sad that he could no longer live among other men. So he withdrew to the solitude of the hills and woods, where day and night he sat weeping and harping, while the woods trembled, and the waters stood still,

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and no hart shunned lion or hound for the magic of his music, and for the sweetness of the sound.

“But the harper knew that nothing would ever please him more in this world, and he resolved to seek the gods of the Spirit-Land, if so be that he might soothe them with his music, until they consented to give him back his wife.

“He found the gate of the Spirit-Land guarded by a great dog named Cerberus, with three heads, very fierce and terrible. But when Orpheus played on his harp the monster leapt upon him fawning, and showed gladness with its tail. The warder of the gate was a dreadful looking man named Charon, who was exceedingly old. But when Charon heard the rare music, he longed so greatly after it that he promised to protect Orpheus in the Spirit-Land, and to bring him safely from thence on his return.

“Then Orpheus went on farther, until he met three dread goddesses called the Fates, who have mercy on none, but visit all according to their works. To them he played and begged for their favour, until they wept with him. So he went farther, playing as he went, and there ran to meet him all the dwellers in the Spirit-Land. They ran to their King, and begged him to allow Eurydice to return to earth with her husband. And while Orpheus played, all the torments of those who were tormented for their sins in the abode of evil spirits ceased. Then all the spirits cried:

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“ ‘Let us give this man his wife back, for he has earned her with his harping!’

“So the King granted his request and gave back Eurydice, but warned him that he must not look back as he left the Spirit-Land, lest she should vanish again from his sight.

“Then Orpheus and Eurydice went together through the Spirit-Land, until they came to the boundary of light and darkness. But as they reached the light Orpheus looked back for very gladness, and straightway the woman vanished out of his sight, and was lost to him.”

Other books exist besides those mentioned, which are said to have been translated by King Alfred, but it is doubtful if they were really his work. One of these is a collection of Saxon proverbs, which was most probably made about two hundred years after his time. The proverbs are arranged in thirty-one paragraphs or stanzas, each of which begins, “Thus saith Alfred, England’s Comfort,” or “England’s Shepherd,” or “England’s Darling,” etc.

The collection has the following short preface in verse telling that the proverbs were spoken at a meeting, probably of the Witan, held at Sifford, or Seaford, in Oxfordshire:—

*“At Sifford there sate many thanes,  
Many bishops, many learned,  
With earls and awful knights,*

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*There was Earl Alfrich, very learned in the law;  
There also was Alfred, England's herdsman,  
England's darling;*

*He was King of England, he taught them,  
All who could hear him,  
How they should lead their lives.*

*Alfred was a King of England that was very strong.  
He was both king and scholar, he loved well God's work;  
He was wise and advised in his talk;  
He was the wisest man that was in all England."*

The book ends with the following words of advice supposed to have been spoken by Alfred on his deathbed to his son:—

“Thus quoth Alfred: ‘My dear son sit thou now beside me and I will deliver thee true instruction. My son I feel that my hour is near, my face is pale, my days are nearly run. We must soon part. I shall to another world, and thou shalt be left alone with all my wealth. I pray thee, for thou art my dear child, strive to be a father and a lord to thy people; be thou the children's father and the widow's friend; comfort thou the poor and shelter the weak, and with all thy might right that which is wrong. And my son govern thyself by law; then shall the Lord love thee and God above all things shall be thy reward. Call thou upon Him to advise thee in all thy need, and so shall He help thee the better to compass that which thou wouldst.’”

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King Alfred is said to have also written a book on Hawking. The sport of catching wild birds by hawks trained for the purpose was very popular in those days, and was a favourite pastime of the King. Unfortunately this book has been lost.

Many other Latin books were translated at the King's desire by the scholars who gathered at his court.

The English into which all Alfred's books were translated differs very considerably from our language of the present day. To distinguish it from modern English, into which it changed very gradually, the English of that day is usually known as Anglo-Saxon. At the time of his death King Alfred was engaged in translating the Psalms of David. To the end he studied hard. He belonged to that world where effort and progress have no end.



## CHAPTER XVIII: *How Alfred spent his Time & Money*

**T**O King Alfred, busy as he constantly was, time was very precious, and in order to get through his work he had to divide his day carefully. Had he not done so, the great work of his life during the years of peace would have been left but half done.

The King made a vow that he would dedicate eight hours out of every twenty-four to the service of God. Another eight hours were devoted by him to public business, and the remaining eight to rest and recreation. In those days clocks and watches were unknown, and time could only be measured by the sun. Sundials were much used, but on cloudy days, and of course during the night, these were useless. Often would the King fear lest while occupied with public affairs he should allow to pass the hours which he had promised to give to the service of God. He reflected much on this matter until at last a clever invention occurred to him. By means of repeated experiments he found that a candle containing twelve pennyweights of wax burned exactly four hours. So he ordered his chaplains Athelstan and Werewulf to procure enough wax to weigh seventy-two pennyweights. With this he ordered six candles to be made, all of equal size and weight, and divided by lines into inches. These were lighted in succes-

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sion, and burned for twenty-four hours. The King afterwards ordered similar candles to be burned constantly before the bones of the saints, which he always took with him on his journeys. These bones were believed to possess miraculous healing powers. He also commanded his clergy to keep time-measuring candles burning in the churches. By this means the passing of each hour was marked, and was notified to the people by the ringing of bells.

It was soon found, however, that six candles did not always last twenty-four hours. Alfred's clever invention was often rendered useless by the boisterous winds which especially at certain seasons of the year sometimes blew continuously, day and night penetrating the open windows and doorways.

At that time glass was almost unknown in England, though princes and wealthy aldermen sometimes possessed glass drinking-vessels, brought from foreign countries, and considered very rare and valuable. But to employ glass to exclude wind and rain, while admitting light into churches and houses had not then occurred to the people of England. The few windows made in buildings consisted of narrow oblong holes open to the air. Through these and through the badly fitting doors the wind easily entered, and seriously interfered with the burning of Alfred's candles. The lights were either blown out or they burned down quicker than usual, making the correct measurement of time impossible.



"ALFRED CAUSES CANDLES TO BE LIT IN CHURCHES"



## *How Alfred spent his Time & Money*

When Alfred heard that the candles thus burned out before the proper time, he tried to invent some means of getting over the difficulty. Soon he thought of an excellent plan. He caused beautiful lanterns to be constructed of wood, and plates of ox-horn, planed so thin that they were as transparent as glass. In these lanterns, which had small holes at the top and were closed by horn doors, the candles were placed, and were thus sheltered from the wind while they could be seen perfectly. By this contrivance the six candles lighted in succession burned twenty-four hours, and when these were finished others were immediately lighted.

The eight hours consecrated by King Alfred to the service of God were spent partly in private prayer in the church, partly in attending the public services, and partly in performing works of charity and mercy. Every day he listened with reverence and attention to the reading of the Holy Scriptures, and afterwards discussed the meaning of difficult passages with the learned men whom he had gathered around him. He also took part with great delight in the singing of psalms and hymns. His works of charity were numerous, and he was ever ready to show sympathy with the poor and afflicted. He thought little of his own needs, but constantly of how he could serve others. If the eight hours set apart for public business proved too short for the work Alfred wished to accomplish, he continued to labour during the

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

hours of rest, rather than take from those which he had consecrated to the service of God. There can be little doubt that the fatigue of his endless labour, acting on a frame weakened by disease, shortened his life. Yet these years of peace were happy for him, though they were all too brief.

The King had a large revenue from his estates and other sources. This he spent with the greatest care, for he was a thorough man of business, careful in detail, industrious and methodical. He considered himself only a steward of great possessions, for which he must one day give an account.

Much of the King's revenue was derived from the crown lands, and from his private estates. His royal castles at Dene and Leoneford have been already mentioned. He also owned a castle at Reading, and private estates in almost every shire in Wessex, as well as in Mercia and Kent. The royal properties were most numerous in Wilts, Hants, and Somerset, in which shires Alfred owned as many as twenty estates. Part of the produce of all these lands was sold, and the money paid to the King.

Alfred's wise management of his estates brought about a great increase in the revenues during his reign, and considerably raised the value of the land. His encouragement of agriculture and of such handicrafts as were then known brought new wealth to the realm.

Other sources of royal income were the tolls,

## *How Alfred spent his Time & Money*

customs and taxes paid to the King. Tolls were paid by all who traded in the King's markets, and the customs by foreign merchants who came to the different ports of the kingdom. As Alfred encouraged trade with different lands the customs gradually increased.

By the law of treasure-trove, anything of value found in the kingdom, such as gold, silver or precious stones, became the property of the King. He also inherited the lands and goods of those who died without heirs.

Large sums derived from fines, especially from the weregeld, or fine for murder, were also paid to the King. In those days Englishmen were much given to brawling and fighting, and theft was very common. The heavy fines often imposed for these offences brought in a considerable sum.

King Alfred determined to spend his yearly income with the same conscientious care as he spent his time. He divided his revenues into two parts, of which one was devoted to the service of God, and the other to the needs of his kingdom and royal household. The first portion was divided into four equal parts, of which the first was bestowed in alms on the poor, but with a degree of wisdom and discretion very uncommon at that time, Alfred commanded that in this matter the advice of Pope Gregory the Great should be followed: "Give not much to whom you should give little, nor little to whom much, nor

# *The Story of Alfred the Great*

something to whom nothing, nor nothing to whom something.”

The second part of the consecrated money was given to the support of the abbeys built by Alfred at Shaftesbury and Athelney. The third part was spent by Alfred on the education of his people, in supplying the clergy and laity with English books, and in supporting the court schools for young nobles. With the fourth portion various churches and monasteries in Mercia and Wessex were assisted, according as they had need; alms were sent to churches in foreign lands, especially to Rome; and yearly embassies were sent with gifts to the Pope.

The remaining half of Alfred's revenue was managed with equal care. It was divided into three parts, of which the first was spent for the maintenance of the court and royal household. To the arrangements of his court Alfred gave the most careful attention. His personal followers were all specially appointed, and their duties assigned them by himself. The great officers of the King's household, who were later to play such an important part in English politics, first appear during Alfred's reign. The Horse-thane or Constable, the Cup-Thane or Butler, and the Hoarder or Treasurer were nobles of the highest rank. Records of the King's household expenditure were carefully kept, and there is no evidence that he ever spent money in useless luxury either for himself or his family.



## *How Alfred spent his Time & Money*

With the second portion of the unconsecrated half of Alfred's revenue the workmen, artisans and designers whom he had invited to England were liberally supported; part was also bestowed on the learned foreigners who frequented the court, and to whom Alfred always gave with the greatest generosity, not waiting until their necessities forced them to ask aid.

The expenses of the army and navy did not fall heavily on the King, because in those days soldiers and sailors were expected to serve without pay. The King, however, was expected to find bread, meat and beer for his troops, and part of the produce of the cultivated land had to be devoted to this purpose.

The remaining part of the King's revenue was spent on his buildings, on the ships which he built at his own expense, and on the beautiful illumination of his beloved books. He also caused to be made all kinds of beautiful ornaments, and employed many goldsmiths at the court.

By his intense love for music, literature, and works of art, the King influenced his people to care likewise for these things, thus softening and refining their manners by elevating and ennobling their thoughts.

## CHAPTER XIX: *King Alfred's Children*

**K**ING ALFRED had no settled home, for even in time of peace he was constantly moving from place to place attending to the affairs of his kingdom. Whenever possible, his wife Elswitha and her children accompanied him, the court school moving with them.

The King had a large family of children, some of whom died in early youth. His faithful wife, who took no share in public affairs, devoted herself to the careful training of her boys and girls. Thanks to their parents' love and care for them, Alfred's children all turned out well. Two boys and three girls lived to grow up. The boys were Edward and Ethelward, the girls Ethelfleda, Ethelgeda and Elfrida.

It was during the first year of Alfred's reign, in the midst of the Danish wars, that his eldest child, Ethelfleda, was born. The little princess shared her parents' wandering life, and was probably taken with them into hiding at Athelney. Soon after the Peace of Wedmore, Ethelfleda, although then scarcely eight years old, was married to Ethelred, the brave and powerful alderman of Mercia. In later years this marriage proved to have been a wise step on Alfred's part, for it united Mercia to him by the closest of ties, although he never ruled there as

## *King Alfred's Children*

king. Ethelred remained a loyal ally of the crown until the end of his life. As leader of the Mercian troops he fought many battles against the Danes, and won great glory for his brilliant victory over the enemy during the last Danish war of Alfred's reign. His wise rule greatly strengthened the Mercian kingdom. He taught his people to hold their own against the Welsh on the one side, and the East Anglian Danes on the other.

The princess Ethelfleda was a great favourite with the people of Mercia. When she grew to womanhood she was allowed to enjoy equal power with her husband. They had one little daughter, Elfwyn, who was their great joy, and who was brought up with her cousin, Athelstan and his sisters, of whom we shall hear later.

Sad to relate, the brave Ethelred's health gradually failed when he was yet in the prime of life. During his long illness Ethelfleda took the lead in defending Mercia against the Danes. She ordered several new fortresses to be built in Mercia. Two of these were on the old Roman road called Watling Street, which led from London to Wroxeter, near Shrewsbury; one was at Bridgenorth, in Shropshire, and one near the middle course of the Severn. Garrisons of Mercian soldiers were sent to defend these fortresses against the enemy.

To the great grief of his wife and little daughter, the illness of Ethelred ended in his death in 912.

# *The Story of Alfred the Great*

Ethelfleda continued to rule, and was given the title of "Lady of the Mercians." For many years she governed Mercia wisely and justly, following in the footsteps of her great father. She made alliances with the Irish and Welsh against the Danes, and her armies defeated the Northmen in several battles. More than once she led her own troops to victory. Her brother Edward, who succeeded Alfred on the throne of Wessex, owed much to her loyal help against the Danes. Mercian troops were ever ready to join the Wessex army in defending the kingdom.

Ethelfleda died at her palace at Tamworth, in Staffordshire, on June 12, 918, and was buried in the Church of St Peter at Gloucester. Her daughter Elfwyn had been sought in marriage by a Danish chief, but her uncle, Edward, refused to consent to such an alliance, fearing that all Mercia would thus fall into the power of the Danes. So he carried her off to the Wessex court.

King Alfred's eldest son, Edmund died in boyhood. Little is known of him except that he was a gentle and amiable youth, too fragile and delicate to survive the hardships of those rude times.

Alfred's second son, afterwards known as Edward the Elder, was a tall, handsome youth, who delighted in the chase and in all manly sports. By the time he reached manhood he is said to have been a better soldier than his father, though not so good a scholar.



"THE KING'S SON AT HIS OLD NURSE'S HUT" Page 151



## *King Alfred's Children*

At the age of twenty he distinguished himself by his bravery in the Danish wars, as related in another chapter.

The following story is told of Edward's marriage. "One day the prince, while hunting in the forest, found himself near a hut in which lived an old woman who had been his nurse. On entering the hut to visit his old friend, the prince was surprised and delighted to find there a beautiful maiden whom his nurse had adopted as her daughter. The maiden's name was Edgina, and she is said to have been the orphan daughter of a woodcutter, who had met his death in the forest.

"The prince had no sooner seen her, than, charmed by her beauty, he fell deeply in love with her. Strange to say, on the night before Edward's visit, Edgina had had a dream, in which she saw the moon shine from her body so brightly that it illumined the whole land.

"Now the old nurse was somewhat of a witch, so, when Edgina related this dream to her, she declared it meant that a great future was in store for the girl. Though the nurse knew that King Alfred would be much displeased if his son wedded a maiden of such humble birth, she did all she could to bring about their marriage. After the day of Prince Edward's first visit, the lovers met frequently in the forest.

"At last the nurse arranged for a secret marriage

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to take place between them. Edward's parents were deeply grieved when they heard that their son had married without their consent. For a long time they refused to recognize Edgina as Prince Edward's wife, or to receive her at the court.

"After giving birth to a son and daughter poor Edgina died. Her son, who was named Athelstan, was then taken to his grandfather's court. He was a child of singular beauty and charm, and he soon completely won the heart of King Alfred. The King was so much pleased by the boy's early promise that he recognized him as his heir after Edward. He caused him to be dressed in a scarlet cloak, with jewelled belt, and a Saxon sword with gold scabbard.

"The motherless boy was brought up by his aunt Ethelfleda, with his cousin Elfwyn. He grew up a wise and noble man, and lived to rule Wessex as one of its best and greatest kings."

Edward was twice married after the death of Edgina, and had twelve children, some of whom became very famous. Four of his daughters married powerful European princes, and his second and third sons, Edmund and Eadred, succeeded Athelstan as kings of Wessex. Edward reigned as king for twenty-three years, having inherited all the power of his great father. He defended his kingdom successfully against the Danes, and increased its prosperity by his wise government.



## *King Alfred's Children*

King Alfred's fourth child was Ethelgeda, who became noted for her learning and piety. She was delicate from birth, and decided, when very young, to enter a convent. As already related, she was chosen Abbess of Shaftesbury when about sixteen years of age, and held that position until her death, the date of which is uncertain. The position held by Ethelgeda at Shaftesbury induced King Alfred to bestow many estates and much wealth on the Abbey.

Alfred's youngest daughter Elfrida, or Elfthryth, was brought up at the court with her brother Edward. The children studied some of the English books which their father had translated, and learned many Psalms and English poems by heart. Old records state that Elfrida was specially beloved by the Wessex people, but she was not destined to remain long among them. The date of her marriage is uncertain; probably she was only about twelve when she was married to Baldwin II of Flanders, a violent and greedy man, the son of Alfred's step-mother Judith.

After the death of King Ethelbald, Judith had returned to France, and became by a third marriage the wife of Baldwin Iron-Arm, the first Count of Flanders. Though the people of Wessex had no love for her, a reconciliation took place between Judith and Alfred after he became king. Alfred knew the importance of uniting powerful foreign

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princes to him by marriage, so he consented to give his little daughter to Judith's son. Elfrida was taken by her husband overseas to Flanders, and it is uncertain if she ever saw her native country again. Though little is known of her married life, we may hope that she lived happily in her new home. She had two sons and two daughters. From her eldest son, Armulf, was descended Matilda, wife of William the Conqueror, and first Norman Queen of England. Through her our present sovereign, King George V, can trace his descent from Alfred the Great.

Elfrida survived her husband for fourteen years, and died in 929. She was buried in the Church of St Peter at Ghent, in Flanders. The English estates which had been left to her by her father King Alfred, she bestowed on the Abbey of St Peter at Ghent.

Ethelward, the youngest son of Alfred, greatly delighted his father by becoming a famous scholar. He inherited all the King's great love of learning, and devoted most of his time to study. The prince was educated first at the court school, and afterwards he studied at some of the great monastic schools of Wessex. Ethelward's character was entirely different from that of his brother Edward, for he was ever gentle and submissive toward his parents. His frank and generous nature caused him to be beloved by all. To this favourite son

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King Alfred left great estates in different parts of Wessex.

Ethelward married and had three children, but nothing is known of their descendants. He died on October 16, 922, and was buried in the royal vault at Winchester.

## CHAPTER XX: *Alfred's Last War*

**A**LFRED'S troubles with the Danes were not yet over. One more campaign had to be fought ere he laid down his sword for ever. Thanks to his wise foresight, however, the people of Wessex were now better able to resist the invaders than they had ever been before.

During the years of peace in England the Vikings had been occupied in plundering and destroying other countries. After the death of Charles the Fat, a descendant of the mighty emperor Charlemagne, his vast empire had been broken up into portions—Germany being ruled by his nephew Armulf, to whom was given the title of Emperor; France by Odo, Count of Paris; and the smaller divisions by petty sovereigns. The different rulers soon quarrelled with each other, which gave the Danes an opportunity for plundering them all in turn. At last the Emperor Armulf re-established his authority over the western portion of the empire, and having mustered a huge army of Bavarians, Franks and Saxons, he defeated the Danes in a great battle fought near Louvaine, in Belgium. This drove the Northmen from Germany.

Meantime, however, another great Danish army, led by the sea-king Hastings, had for some time been engaged in plundering that part of northern

## *Alfred's Last War*

France which lies around the town of Amiens. They at length defeated Odo in several battles, and took possession of the whole northern portion of his kingdom. It was not long, however, before their ravages brought a terrible famine on the ruined land, from which they were forced to flee. Hastings fled to Boulogne with his followers, and was there joined by the Danes who had been driven from Germany. Swarms of reckless freebooters and robbers from all parts of Europe also hastened to join him, and he was soon in command of a vast army.

By means of small pirate boats Hastings managed to communicate with the Danes who lived in East Anglia, and from them learned how rich and prosperous Wessex had become during the years of his absence. He soon set about building a fleet of new ships at Boulogne, with which to sail with his followers for England. The robbers determined to take with them their wives and children, for this was to be no mere plundering raid, but a complete conquest of England.

On a beautiful autumn day of the year 893, two hundred and fifty pirate ships, with many men and horses on board, sailed from Boulogne. Steering straight across the Channel they landed without opposition in East Kent, near the mouth of the river Rother, about seven miles west of Dungeness. Up that river they towed their ships for four miles,

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until they reached a half-built fortress, erected by some Kentish peasants. This they captured with little difficulty, but found it in such an unfinished condition that it was of little use for defence. Therefore they advanced a few miles farther until they came to Appledore, in Kent, where they encamped on the borders of a great wood known as Andred's Weald. This wood stretched westward for 120 miles, from Romney Marsh to Hampshire, and for 30 miles from north to south.

Meanwhile another fleet of eighty Danish ships, commanded by Hastings himself, had crossed the Channel from Boulogne. Sailing round the North Foreland they entered the river Swale, a tributary of the Medway which separates the Isle of Sheppey from Kent. The Northmen landed near the spot where the town of Milton now stands, and there built a fortified camp.

The two Danish camps were thus only about twenty-six miles apart. The invaders had chosen their position well. Both camps were close to navigable rivers, up which the Danes might escape in their ships if need arose. Through the hidden paths of the forest which stretched between them they could hold communication with each other, or retire unseen into the heart of Wessex.

As soon as King Alfred heard of the arrival of the invaders he sent a small force under his son Edward, now a youth of twenty, to watch both camps and

## *Alfred's Last War*

report on their movements. The King was too wise to attempt an immediate attack on the Danish camps, for he knew that their position was very strong. His next step was to cause all the Danes who had settled in East Anglia to renew their oaths, and give hostages as pledges that they would take no part with the invaders. This they did readily, although they only waited their opportunity to join the enemy.

The King then mustered the division of his troops whose turn it was for active service, and marched to join his son Edward. He encamped at a place from which he hoped to be able to prevent the two Danish armies from joining each other, and prepared to attack either of them should they attempt to advance into the open country. During the winter, however, the Danes made no effort to leave their camps, though small parties of them made plundering raids on the surrounding districts, and usually managed to escape capture by the English.

At last Hastings sent messengers to Alfred offering to enter into an agreement which he had secretly no intention of keeping. To deceive the King he even sent to the English camp his two sons, and declared that he desired them to receive Christian baptism. King Alfred received the boys with much kindness, and they were solemnly baptized as Christians. It is believed that Alfred's friend, Bishop Werferth, performed the ceremony. The

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King himself and his son-in-law, Alderman Ethelred of Mercia, stood godfathers for the boys. After the ceremony the kind-hearted King entertained them at a sumptuous feast, and afterwards sent them back to their father loaded with gifts.

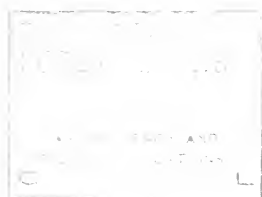
Alfred's generosity failed to touch the treacherous old sea-king. The English, trusting to the treaty made, had relaxed their watchfulness, when, soon after Easter 894, the Danes at Appledore suddenly broke up their camp and sent their ships round to Benfleet, in Essex. They then made their way through the woods to Berkshire and Hampshire, which they plundered. Hastings, with his followers, also took their ships, with their women and children on board, to Benfleet, and began to harry and plunder the districts that had been made over to Alfred by the treaty of 884. After working much havoc in these regions, Hastings led his robbers into Hampshire, where he met some of his own marauding troops laden with spoil. With this booty and the plunder which he had taken himself he turned northward.

Meantime King Alfred had received a message from his son Edward, stating that the Danes had passed near him on the march, but that he had been unable to stop them. Hastings had purposed to cross the Thames with his army, and march through Essex to Benfleet, where his whole fleet had now assembled. The King had no sooner received the





"PRINCE EDWARD FOUGHT WITH LION-LIKE COURAGE"



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prince's message than he hastily mustered his army, and pursued the Danes. He was soon joined by Prince Edward with his troops, and, marching as rapidly as possible, he succeeded in overtaking the Danes at Farnham, in Surrey. For the first time since their landing the robbers were forced to fight.

There followed a long and fierce battle, in which Prince Edward fought with lion-like courage, winning great glory for his valour. At length one of the pagan leaders fled wounded from the field, and his departure caused a panic among his followers. They suddenly turned and rushed northward, in the wildest confusion and terror. On reaching the Thames they could find only one ford. By this they all attempted to cross at once, but in their headlong rush many of them were swept away and drowned. A large number of horses and much spoil fell into the hands of the English.

The survivors of the Danish army reached a place called Thorney Island, at the junction of the Thames and Colne, where they were soon joined by Hastings with those of his followers who had escaped from the battle-field. King Alfred lost no time in dispatching a body of troops under the gallant Prince Edward to blockade the Northmen in Thorney Island. This time, however, they were well supplied with provisions from their ships, with which they managed to keep in touch throughout the siege.

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At length the period of service of Prince Edward's division of the army expired, and his men returned home. King Alfred was on his way to replace them with another division when startling news reached him. In spite of their solemn oaths the Danes of Northumbria and East Anglia had risen in revolt and joined the invaders. Two of their fleets had already landed in Devon; the larger one, of a hundred ships, had sailed up the Exe and besieged Exeter, while the smaller one, of forty ships, had made its way up the Bristol Channel, and landed on the shores of North Devon.

King Alfred was not greatly surprised to receive this news, as he had for some time suspected the East Anglian Danes of treachery. With the division of his troops which had been already mustered, he immediately hurried westward, leaving Prince Edward with a small force to continue the siege of Thorney Island. The Prince marched through Essex with his troops, but arrived only to find that the Danes had taken advantage of his absence to escape to Benfleet.

As Prince Edward's force was too small to enable him to attack the Danes at Benfleet with any hope of success, he advanced to join his brother-in-law, Alderman Ethelred, who was holding London with a large body of Mercian troops.

The citizens of London were greatly alarmed on hearing that the great Danish army was encamped

## *Alfred's Last War*

within thirty miles of them. They implored Ethelred to protect them, for it was expected that the invaders would immediately march on the city.

Day after day passed, however, without the Danes making any attempt to attack London. At length Ethelred determined to storm their camp at Benfleet. Marching suddenly against them with a large force he arrived at what was for him a fortunate time, Hastings being absent with the greater part of his troops on a plundering expedition through Mercia. The Danes, who had not expected an attack, were taken completely by surprise. Not only was their camp stormed and all their plunder captured, but most of their vessels, with the women and children on board, fell into the hands of the English. Much booty, of gold, silver, horses, and garments, was also taken.

Among the prisoners were the wife and two sons of Hastings, who were sent to King Alfred, but the generous King refused to revenge himself on them by keeping them captive. He ordered his godsons and their mother to be sent back to the faithless Hastings, and before their departure gave them many costly presents. All the serviceable Danish vessels which had fallen into the hands of the English were sent to London or Rochester, while the others were broken up or burnt. This was one of the most complete victories in the annals of Wessex.

The surviving Danes, who had fled from Benfleet, made their way eastward to Shoebury, where they

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were soon joined by Hastings with his troops. Soon after his arrival they all set out along the northern bank of the Thames, and continued their march westward until they reached the Severn, intending to follow the course of that river toward the south. They thus hoped to join their East Anglian allies who had landed in Devonshire, and who still possessed a fleet.

Alderman Ethelred had, however, kept a careful watch on their movements, and was too good a general to permit them thus to join their allies without opposition. He quickly ordered a muster of every available troop, and the men of Wessex hastened from all parts to obey his summons. Aldermen Ethelhelm of Wiltshire, Ethelnoth of Somerset, and many noble thanes joined him with their forces. A powerful body of soldiers from North Wales also hastened to obey his call.

These forces represented nothing less than a rising of the whole English people against the enemy. Their readiness to volunteer, their rapid muster, and excellent organization marked the progress which their country had made under King Alfred since the last invasion.

At the head of a magnificent force, Alderman Ethelred marched to Buttington, on the Severn, and there laid siege to a fortress held by the enemy. Buttington is an ancient border parish between Shropshire and Montgomeryshire. Through it ran

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a great earthwork known as Offa's Dyke, built about the year 795 by Offa, King of Mercia, for the purpose of forming a boundary between England and Wales.

For several weeks the Danes were so closely besieged in Buttington that they could neither escape to seek food nor hold communication with their allies in Devon. Their provisions were soon exhausted. Many of their horses died of starvation, and they were forced to eat the rest. At length, Hastings, driven to desperation, was compelled to make a sudden sally with his men toward the east, and attempted to fight his way through the besieging army. The English met them outside the fortifications and a furious battle raged. Both sides fought desperately and many noble English thanes were slain. Among them was a gallant noble named Ordheh, who had been much honoured and beloved. By degrees, however, the English forced the Northmen before them, until they scattered in wild flight. Evening found Ethelred and his troops masters of the field.

About seventy years ago, some workmen, digging the foundations for a new school near Offa's Dyke, found a great quantity of bones just below the surface. There can be little doubt that these were the bones of many great warriors slain in the battle of Buttington.

After this defeat Hastings was forced to make

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a treaty with Ethelred, and the Danish army was permitted to leave Mercia unmolested. In the late summer they set out on the march westward by the old Roman road called Watling Street. They succeeded in reaching Danish East Anglia, where they once more established themselves. But they had not yet ceased to trouble Wessex.



## CHAPTER XXI: *The Defeat of the Danes*

**I**N spite of the crushing defeat inflicted on Hastings and his Danes at Buttington, the sea-robbers were again to prove their marvellous power of rallying. In Danish East Anglia, where they were once more surrounded by their friends and allies, they were soon joined by fresh reinforcements from Northumbria. This encouraged Hastings to renew the struggle, and he determined to make another expedition to the west.

His first step was to order all the Danish women and children who had accompanied him from France to be placed on board the few ships left to them, and conveyed from Shoebury to the island of Mersey, in the estuary of the Blackwater, a few miles south of Colchester. This was a safer place than Shoebury, and farther from London.

In the autumn of 894, Hastings and his followers left their ships to the care of their East Anglian allies, and made a sudden dash across country toward the north-west. Unfortunately, the English were unable to oppose their advance, for Alderman Ethelred had disbanded his army soon after the battle of Buttington, believing that the enemy would not attempt another attack before the winter.

Marching day and night without stopping, Hastings and his followers reached the ruined walls of the

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old Roman city of Chester. To this they laid siege, but the English garrison held out bravely for two days, and showed signs of being prepared to resist the besiegers for a considerable time. Hastings then decided that he would give up the attempt to take the fortress, and contented himself with slaying all the men whom he and his followers were able to capture outside the city. The Danes also seized all the cattle and corn in the neighbourhood. They were unable to use the whole of the corn for themselves or their horses, so they burned the remainder. After causing as much havoc as they were able, they withdrew to the peninsula of Wirral, the long stretch of land, protected by an embankment, lying between the rivers Mersey and Dee, in Cheshire. There they took up their position for the winter.

During all this time King Alfred had remained in Devon with his forces, engaged in the attempt to raise the siege of Exeter. Many months passed before he succeeded in driving the Danes from Exeter, as well as from North Devon. Even then the pirates fled to their ships, and in these continued for some time to hover round the coasts of Devon and Cornwall, waiting for an opportunity to land. So Alfred wisely decided to remain in Devon with his army during the winter, in order to guard the coasts.

Though nearly two years had now elapsed since the Danes returned to England, they had failed to take any strongholds of importance, and, thanks



"ALFRED WITH HIS SHIPS WATCHING FOR THE DANES  
NEAR THE DEVON COAST" *Page 168*

THE  
FOLIO (1871-1874)

ACTING LUNCHEON AND  
FOOD FOUNDATIONS.

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## *The Defeat of the Danes*

to the splendid organization of the Wessex troops, had been defeated again and again. They were not yet crushed, however, for the old sea-king Hastings was still at the head of a powerful army whose plundering raids wasted and destroyed the country.

In the spring of 895, Hastings found himself in difficulty on account of a lack of provisions for his army. By that time most of his cattle had been killed for food, and the rest, together with his supplies, had been unexpectedly seized by some English troops. This forced him to leave the peninsula of Wirral, and he decided to make for Wales.

Marching southward through the Welsh territories, the Danes ravaged the country as far as Brecknock and the surrounding districts. They then returned north with their plunder. Fearing to pass through Mercia lest they should meet with Ethelred and his army, they went by Northumbria and the Danelagh to their old quarters in East Anglia. One ancient record states that they did not escape without a sharp encounter at Stamford, in Lincoln, with the troops of Alderman Ethelnoth, who had been on the watch for them. The greater number, however, arrived safely at the island of Mersey, where they once more established themselves.

Meanwhile the strict watch kept by King Alfred and his troops had prevented the pirates from landing in Devon or Cornwall. Wearied by vain attempts to do so, they at length determined to sail

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eastward with their fleet, and rejoin their allies in East Anglia. On the way they made an attack on the coast of Sussex, not far from the town of Chichester. They found the coast well defended, however, for the inhabitants of the district lost no time in turning out in great force. Many Danes were slain, and several of their ships captured. The survivors hastened to Mersey, where they found a great force of their countrymen already assembled for a winter camp.

On learning that the pirates had withdrawn from the coasts, Alfred left Devonshire and marched eastward with his army, intending to advance against Mersey. While he was yet on the way messengers met him with the news that the Danes had unexpectedly left Mersey. Having towed their ships from the Blackwater up the Thames as far as the river Lea, and then up that river to a point twenty miles above London, they there fortified a camp.

Their new camp, in which they remained for the winter, was well chosen as a point from which they might blockade London. This was no doubt their intention, though the winter and spring passed without their daring to come out from behind the fortifications. At length, in the summer of 896, some of the citizens of London determined to risk an attack on the Danish camp. But the Danes, who were on the alert, beat them back with great

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loss, four English thanes being slain during the attack.

At the time of harvest, King Alfred, fearing a Danish raid, encamped with an army in the neighbourhood of London in order to protect the crops, and watch the movements of the enemy. One day, while his army was thus engaged, the King rode along the bank of the river Lea and carefully examined the stream. He discovered a spot where it would be possible to divert the river from its course, and so cut off the escape of the Danish ships.

The King first ordered two strong forts to be constructed, one on each side of the Lea. Near these forts he caused a number of shallow channels to be dug, into which the main stream could flow. One day, while this work was still in progress, the Danes were horrified to observe the water of the river flowing off so rapidly as to make it impossible for them to take away their ships. Without waiting for the trap to be completed, Hastings and his Danes forsook their ships, and fled in panic across the country toward the north-east. So rapidly did they escape along Watling Street that, though Alfred's troops started in hot pursuit, they were unable to overtake them. The Danes reached Bridgenorth, in Shropshire, where they built a new stronghold. While the King's army continued to pursue the fugitives for some distance, the Londoners

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seized the deserted ships. All the useless vessels were burnt, and the rest towed in triumph to London.

In the spring of 897, Hastings, who was now completely baffled and crushed, broke up his last camp on English soil. The Northumbrian and East Anglian Danes who had joined him returned to their homes, while Hastings himself, with his followers, made his way to the east coast to rejoin the Danish women and children. With his few remaining ships the old sea-robber then sailed away 'southward over sea to the Seine,' never to return. Thus Alfred's last war ended in the complete defeat of the Danes.

Though the English had lost fewer men in this than in the former wars, a pestilence had raged among men and cattle during the three years that the Danes were in England. It attacked rich and poor alike, and thousands of people died, including many of the King's household servants.

The Danes had been driven from England, but the pirates of the sea-coasts could not give up their roving life all at once. In the autumn of the year 897, six pirate ships came to the Isle of Wight, and did much damage there as well as around the coasts of Devon.

King Alfred ordered nine of his new vessels to go out against them, and cut off their escape in whatever port they were found. The Englishmen came upon the pirates in the Solent, and there blockaded



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them at an hour when the tide was very low. Three of the pirate vessels lay stranded owing to the ebb of the water, and their crews had gone ashore. The crews of those which were still afloat sailed boldly out to attack the English ships. Alfred's nine vessels quickly surrounded them, and though the pirates fought with desperate courage, they were only one to every three of the Englishmen engaged. Two of the pirate vessels were soon captured and their crews slain. The third ship escaped with only five men alive on it.

The victorious Englishmen, determined to capture this vessel, immediately gave chase. Their triumph had rendered them reckless of danger, and in the heat of the pursuit they failed to observe that they were sailing into low water. Suddenly, with no warning, all the King's ships found themselves stranded. Three ran aground on the side where the Danish vessels lay, and all the others on the opposite side. This made it impossible for those on the opposite side to go to the help of the three vessels which had been stranded close to the enemy.

The pirates did not fail to take advantage of this disaster. When the tide had still farther ebbed the pirate crews from the stranded vessels returned and made a fierce attack on the three English ships which lay at their mercy. Great was the rage and dismay of the Englishmen on the other shore, unable to go to the assistance of their comrades. In their

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helplessness they were seen to beat their breasts and tear their hair.

In spite of their perilous position, the Englishmen defended themselves with great courage. They determined at all costs to prevent the capture of their vessels as long as possible, for it was certain that, with the turn of the tide, help would come to them from their comrades across the water. Meantime, however, many of the bravest fell, mortally wounded by the pirates. Of the Danish crews no less than one hundred and twenty men were slain, while the English lost seventy-two, including five officers of the King's household. At last, when the English were driven almost to despair, the slowly returning tide reached the point where the Danish vessels lay. The pirates knew that if they waited until the tide reached the other six English vessels there would be no hope of their own escape, so they rowed away with all speed. Their vessels, however, were so badly damaged that they were unable to proceed farther than the Sussex coast, on which two of them were cast ashore. Their crews were immediately captured by the English, bound in chains, and brought to the King at Winchester.

Although King Alfred desired to show mercy to all who had wronged him, he knew that only by taking the severest measures could he put down piracy in future. If this were not done, many innocent people would have to suffer in days to come, and

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countless lives be lost. Therefore the King ordered all the captive pirates to be hanged, and, further, made a law that in future every pirate, whether English or Danish, captured on the coasts of England, should be put to death without mercy. As his orders were strictly carried out, the sea-faring people of Northumbria and East Anglia gradually ceased to follow the trade of pirates.

## CHAPTER XXII: *The Death of the King*

**A**FTER his final victory over the Danes, King Alfred enjoyed, during four happy years, the peace for which he had so greatly longed. He resumed the work which had been interrupted during the war, and became the captain of every enterprise which tended to the progress and welfare of his people. But bodily weakness, caused by the disease from which he had so long suffered, and aggravated by the hardships endured during the wars, had made the great King old before his time. At the end of the fourth year of peace his health failed completely. It is generally believed that his death took place at his royal palace of Wolvesey, in Winchester. No record exists of his last days, but we may believe that he met his end peacefully, happy in the knowledge that his life's work had been successfully completed.

Alfred died on October 28, 901, at the early age of fifty-three, after a reign of twenty-nine years and six months. The Abbey Church of New Minster was unfinished at the time of his death, and he was buried in Winchester Cathedral. Even before the completion of the Abbey Church quarrels arose between the monks and the cathedral canons, who were jealous of the honours bestowed on the abbey, and it was declared that Alfred's spirit might be seen

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wandering about the churchyard at night. His son Edward, on hearing of this, ordered the King's coffin to be solemnly transferred to the Abbey church which by that time was nearly completed.

In the reign of King Henry I, when the monks removed from the New Minster to Hyde Abbey outside the city walls, there was a very great procession, in which the King and Queen, and the Bishop of Winchester took part. The monks carried with them not only the relics of the saints, but the coffins of King Alfred, King Edward the Elder, Alfred's wife Elswitha, the good monk Grimbald, whose remains were enclosed in a silver shrine, and other illustrious dead. There Alfred's coffin rested for four hundred years, guarded by the faithful monks, and visited by the people who loved and revered his memory. At the Reformation, when the great English monasteries were dissolved, all the tombs at Winchester of Alfred and his descendants were destroyed.

By his will Alfred left five hundred pounds and many rich lands and estates to each of his sons. To his son Edward he left his principal estates in Wiltshire and Somersetshire, including the famous royal burgh of Wedmore. To his youngest son Ethelward, he left the great estates of Guildford and Godalming in Surrey, and Steyning in Sussex.

To his wife Elswitha and his three daughters the King bequeathed a hundred pounds each, and

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certain lands. Elswitha received the estates of Wantage, Lambourne (near Ashdown), and Ethen-dune (Eddington); for the King had desired that she should possess the place of his birth and the scenes of his two greatest victories. To his youngest daughter Elfrida, he gave the village of Lewisham in Kent, with its dependencies, Greenwich and Woolwich. As already related, Elfrida afterwards gave these estates to the abbey of St Peter at Ghent.

To his nephews Ethelhelm and Ethelward, sons of his brother Ethelred, the King bequeathed certain estates, according to an agreement made between the brothers before Ethelred's death. To them and to one, Osferth, believed to have been a kinsman of his wife, Alfred also left a hundred marks each. Ethelward, the youngest of Alfred's nephews, was not content with his inheritance. He not only endeavoured to extend it, but even attempted to seize the crown after Alfred's death. He thus became the enemy of his cousin, King Edward, against whom he took the field with an army. This revolt ended in 905, when Ethelward was slain in battle.

King Alfred left a hundred marks to each of his aldermen, and to Ethelred his son-in-law, alderman of Mercia, he further bequeathed a sword worth a hundred marks. Among his serving-men, whom he was accustomed to pay at Easter, two hundred pounds were to be divided according to the claims of

## *The Death of the King*

each. His faithful clergy were also remembered in his will. To the Archbishop of Canterbury a hundred marks were bequeathed, and the same sum to Bishops Asser and Werferth.

Alfred believed that masses said for the repose of men's souls and money given to God's poor would benefit the departed in the next world. So he left a sum of two hundred pounds to be devoted to the salvation of his soul, and that of his father and those friends for whose souls they had both promised to pray. This money was divided into four equal parts; of which one was to be given to the mass priests, one to the poor clergy, one to the church where he himself should rest, and one to the poor throughout his kingdom. To this church of New Minster, he had previously bequeathed all the lands he possessed in Kent.

Alfred desired that if there should be still more money in his treasury after these legacies had been paid, it should be divided among those already mentioned in his will. In former years, when he had more relatives living, he had made other wills, in which they were mentioned. If any of these older wills were found after his death he wished them to be destroyed. Alfred commanded that none of the estates bequeathed by him to his kinsmen should ever be given to females, but should be handed down in the male line, according to the custom of his house; for, he adds, "my grandfather gave his

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lands to the spear side and not to the spindle side.”

Lastly, Alfred remembered the slaves on his estates, whose condition he had greatly improved. His personal servants as well as the field labourers were to be given full liberty to go over to another master, or to another estate at their own pleasure, and no one was to oppress them.

The King had refused to hoard his money and had spent it freely for the good of his subjects. Thus he died comparatively poor in worldly wealth, yet the sums mentioned in his will are not so small as might appear to us at the present day. The purchasing power of money in Anglo-Saxon times was very much greater than now. From early times to the eleventh century the usual value of a sheep was one shilling, both in Wessex and Mercia. A pig was worth two shillings, and an ox six. A slave could be bought for one pound, and a horse for half as much.

No historian of that time has left a description of Alfred's appearance. We do not think of the great King as possessing a giant-like form, but suppose him rather to have been of middle height, wiry, and active, with the fair hair and blue eyes of the Saxon race. We know that he was capable of enduring great hardships in camp or on the battle-field.

“No man should desire a soft life,” he had once written. His own life had not been soft. From boy-



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hood to middle age it had been a ceaseless struggle against heathen enemies, against bodily sickness, against the ignorance and superstition of his own subjects. Yet he had ever marched breastforward, bearing affliction with large-hearted cheerfulness and fortitude. His life of constant activity may have helped him to forget the pain from which he frequently suffered, for his strong, brave spirit continually gained the mastery over his frail body. He believed that pain and trouble came from God, and in hours of desertion and defeat we are told that he was encouraged by visions of the saints, who bade him be of good cheer.

The King was at once a great statesman and a great general. As statesman he guided his people through a most difficult period of their history. In saving Wessex from the general wreck brought about by heathen invasions, he made his kingdom the centre for the deliverance and union of all England. Though Alfred did not live to form England into a single kingdom, he made this work possible for his sons and grandsons. He also did much to increase the royal power and authority within his kingdom.

As general, the memory of his valour in the battle-field and his perseverance in the face of overwhelming difficulties will ever serve as an example to the British soldier.

One secret of Alfred's success was that his people knew they could trust him. He is known as Alfred

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the Truth-teller, for his word was his bond. To defend his people, to rule them justly, and to give them wise laws was not enough for him. All this he did and more also. He made it his further business to be their guide, their teacher, their father, and their friend. He undertook the humble task of a translator that they might be the better instructed in their own tongue.

Though a great student, he was no narrow-minded recluse. Though a king he did not hold himself apart from his people, but delighted in mixing freely with them, rejoicing in the society of his scholars, his huntsmen, his craftsmen, and his mariners, interested in every worthy pursuit. While dealing all day with the common affairs of life, he ever kept before him the ideal of the highest.

“I desire,” the King had written, “to leave to those who come after me a memory of me in good works.” His aim has been more than fulfilled. While other great names have been forgotten his has come down to us through a thousand years, encircled by the loving affection of the whole British race, familiar to every English-speaking child.

Though King Alfred died rich in the love and gratitude of his subjects, it was impossible for them fully to realize all he had done for them. He had found them ignorant, dejected, a prey to heathen enemies. He left them enlightened, delivered, inspired with courage and hope, and struggling up-

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wards on a path of progress from which they have never since wholly turned back.

Great as were Alfred's achievements in relation to his opportunities yet it is less for what he did than for the seeds he sowed of still greater things to come that we have now to honour him. For could the King awake from his sleep of a thousand years to gaze on his country and the descendants of those for whom he worked, how greatly amazed would he be at the outcome of his labours.

The little Saxon fort on the banks of the Thames which he rebuilt so long ago, he would find grown into the world's mightiest metropolis. In the English Parliament with its far-reaching power and complicated organization, he would behold the descendants of his Witan, with whom he once held council. In place of the little fleet of ships which he once built at the cost of much labour and self-sacrifice he would find riding on all seas the Imperial navy, glorified by centuries of victory and supremacy, and charged with the guardianship of a fifth of the world.

He who first laboured to translate books into the English tongue would find the wealth of our English literature of to-day. Could he view us in a great panorama, Britain's commerce, her wealth, her armies, her dominions beyond the seas, the great procession of people of all nations now subject to the British crown, would he not marvel greatly at the growth of that seed sown by him a thousand years ago!

## CHAPTER XXIII: *King Alfred's Millenary*

**I**N the autumn of 1901, exactly a thousand years after the death of Alfred, there gathered in the city of Winchester, his ancient capital, a vast assembly of distinguished guests from all parts of the English-speaking world. Noblemen, statesmen, famous generals, men of letters, and representatives from all the Universities and learned societies of Great Britain, America, and the Colonies, met there to do honour to the memory of Alfred the Great, and to take part in the unveiling of a magnificent bronze statue, which had been erected in his honour at a cost of over £5000.

In connexion with the celebrations, an exhibition was also held in the British Museum, London, and was visited by many thousands of people. The exhibits, which excited great interest, consisted of manuscripts, objects of art, and coins, all belonging to the time of King Alfred.

The manuscripts included a very early copy of the *Saxon Chronicle*, and two other copies of later date; a copy of Alfred's last will made between 880 and 885; and a manuscript copy of Asser's *Life of Alfred*. There were also to be seen early copies of all the books still in existence written or translated by King Alfred, including the *Universal History of Orosius*, Alfred's Anglo-Saxon version

## *King Alfred's Millenary*

of Pope Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, Alfred's version of Boethius and of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*; an eleventh century copy of the Laws of King Alfred; a charter giving particulars of the lands granted by Alfred's wife Elswitha to the nuns of St Mary's, Winchester. There was also to be seen a copy of the four Gospels in Latin, followed in a handwriting of the same period, by a copy of the famous letter addressed to Alfred by Fulk, Archbishop of Rheims (see Chapter XIV). At the beginning of each gospel are two pages gorgeously illuminated. There were also several Latin copies of ancient grants and charters, among them being a grant of lands in Kent from King Ethelwulf to one of his thanes, Ealdene. This grant, dated 855, is witnessed by Alfred, the King's son, then six years old. Another was a copy of a grant of land by King Alfred, dated 875.

Among the plate and jewellery, the most remarkable exhibits were two gold rings, relics of priceless value, still to be seen in the British Museum. The first of these, which once belonged to Ethelwulf, Alfred's father, was discovered, by a fortunate chance, during the summer of 1780 in the parish of Laverstock, Wiltshire, not far from Salisbury. It had been pressed out of a cart rut in a field, and was picked up by a labourer, who sold it to a silversmith in Salisbury for thirty-four shillings, the value of the gold. The ring bears some resemblance in shape to a bishop's

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mitre. On it is engraved, in lettering of the ninth century, the words 'Ethelwulf Rex.' Above this is a device filled in, like the letters, with black enamel, representing two peacocks pecking a tree. The ring shows the mark of a cart wheel, and is still somewhat flattened in shape from the crushing received.

The other gold ring was once the property of Ethelswitha, Queen of Mercia, the sister of Alfred, and is of similar make to the first. It was found near Aberford in Yorkshire, in the year 1870, by a ploughman, who first observed it at the point of his ploughshare. He brought it to his master, who, believing it to be brass, attached it to his dog's collar. There it hung for some time, until one day a friend assured him that it was gold. He then carried it to a silversmith in York, and exchanged it for spoons. The dealer afterwards sold the ring, which passed into the possession of various people until it was bequeathed by Sir Wollaston Franks to the British Museum.

The front of the ring is circular in shape, and inlaid with black enamel. The device is a lamb inside a circular medallion, surrounded by four leaves, with the letters A. D. which stand for *Agnus Dei*, Lamb of God. Inside the ring, on the back of the circle, is the name Eathelswitha Regna (*regina*).

From the style of the letters it is believed that they were not engraved by a goldsmith, but scratched

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in later by the priest of some shrine to which Ethelswitha may have presented the ring.

Several gold brooches, a seal, a silver spoon and a fork, all belonging to King Alfred's time, as well as a beautiful copy of the Alfred Jewell, the original of which is in Oxford (see Chapter IX), were among the exhibits.

The collection of coins was very fine, and included some beautiful specimens of the coinage of Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Kent, and Wessex from about 600 to 901. The coins struck under Alfred are mostly silver pennies, each supposed to contain twenty-four grains troy of sterling silver. Of these pennies there are over twenty different kinds struck at no fewer than ten mints. Coins larger than the penny are rare, but two worth nearly seven pence, or  $162\frac{1}{2}$  grains, were to be seen in the collection. It is believed that the heavy coins may have been offering-pennies given by the King to churches.

On some coins the King's bust is shown, his face turned towards the right, with a diadem or band round his head and ornamental drapery on his shoulders. The engraving is in most cases very roughly executed, and it would be a poor compliment to the King to accept the figures on the coins as accurate portraits. All coins bearing the King's image show him without a beard, and on most of them are the words, *Aelfred Rex Saxonum*.

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The Millenary celebrations at Winchester extended over several days, but the principal functions took place on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, 18th, 19th, and 20th September. During these days the streets of Winchester's grey old city were thronged with vaster crowds of people than had ever before been gathered there. On the Wednesday and Thursday visits were paid to the different places of historical interest in or near Winchester.

The ancient hall which formed part of the old castle was visited. This castle was a royal residence and fortress in the time of King Alfred, and continued to be much used by the kings of England after the Conquest. A visit was also paid to Hyde Abbey, the site of Alfred's burial place. The ruins of the monks' barn, and part of the front gateway, are all that now remain of the famous Abbey, although the sites of the fish pond, the Abbey mill, and the parish church are still pointed out. A church, of which the foundations are probably Saxon, still stands on the ancient site.

Winchester Cathedral was also visited. The present edifice has been rebuilt, but on the same site there stood in Alfred's time a cathedral, which was the principal crowning and burial place of the kings of England from Egbert to Cnut. The bones of some of these kings are contained in six painted wooden chests, placed on the north and south sides of the choir.



## *King Alfred's Millenary*

On the Thursday, a visit was paid to the ruins of Wolvesey Palace, where Alfred is believed to have died. Nothing now remains of it but portions of the old ivy-covered walls. It may have been on these very walls that the King, two years before his death, ordered a crew of Danish pirates to be hanged, after trial, at Winchester. Wolvesey is said to have been the place where Alfred assembled the scholars who assisted him in his literary work, and there much of that work, including the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, must have been accomplished.

Friday, September 20, was the greatest day of all in the Millenary celebration, and was observed as a public holiday in Winchester. In the morning a magnificent procession, marked by a wealth of colour, gathered on the Castle Hill, and marched from the West Gate of the city to the Broadway, where the grand ceremony of unveiling Alfred's statue was to take place. First in order came the Band of the First Volunteer Battalion of the Hampshire Regiment; then the white-robed choristers from Winchester, Salisbury, and Chichester Cathedrals, from the Chapel Royal, Windsor, and from city parishes; next, detachments of Northumberland Fusiliers, King's Rifles, Gordon Highlanders, Infantry and Artillery Volunteers; then the Naval Brigade, which was warmly cheered, led by the band of His Majesty's ship "Excellent." After this, in succession followed representatives of friendly societies;

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the City Champion in doughty array; representative clergy; the Master and Brethren of the ancient Hospital of St Cross, Winchester; the masters and scholars of Winchester College; the Dean and Chapter of Winchester Cathedral; the Band of the Rifle Volunteers; delegates of the Universities and learned societies from all parts of the English-speaking world; the Deans of Windsor, Salisbury, Chichester, St Albans, and Durham; the Bishops of Winchester, Salisbury, Guildford, and Southampton; the mayors of many cities and boroughs; the Lord Provost of Edinburgh; the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs of London; the High Sheriff of Hampshire; the Lord Lieutenant (Earl Northbrook); the Earl of Rosebery; Mr Hamo Thornycroft, R.A., the sculptor; the Band of the Gordon Highlanders; the Mayor and Corporation of Winchester.

This procession presented a spectacle of surpassing brilliancy. Nearly all who took part in it were in full academics or levee dress. Gorgeous official robes of scarlet, blue, ermine, and black, academic hoods of every hue, and all manner of quaint head-gear were worn. The whole route of the procession was lined with soldiers; flags waved from every tower, and houses, windows, and balconies were gaily decorated.

When the procession had reached the Broadway and had halted around the veiled statue, the Bishop of Winchester offered up a prayer. Lord Rosebery

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then addressed to those assembled a most eloquent speech in praise of the Saxon hero, King Alfred. At the conclusion of his address he unveiled the statue by pulling a silken cord. "God save the King," was then sung, and cheers were raised for Lord Rosebery and the sculptor, Mr Hamo Thornycroft. Guns thundered forth a loud salute, and the bells of the Cathedral Church rang out a merry peal.

The Mayor of Winchester afterwards entertained four hundred guests at a banquet in the Guildhall. In the afternoon medals and cakes were distributed to the school children. A large ox, weighing eight hundred and thirty seven pounds, was roasted whole, and pieces of it were afterwards distributed to the poor of Winchester. In the evening the streets were brilliantly illuminated, and a display of fireworks ended a day memorable for all time in the annals of Winchester, where, after a thousand years, the memory of the city's greatest son was so fittingly honoured.

The great statue of King Alfred stands in the Broadway facing up the High Street, its splendid background the terraced hill of St Giles. The figure is mounted on two huge blocks of granite, one above the other, both brought from the granite quarries of Penryn, Cornwall. The King holds high uplifted in his right hand, a sheathed sword, grasping it beneath the hilt, which is in the form of a cross, so that it is presented as an emblem of Christianity and of

## *The Story of Alfred the Great*

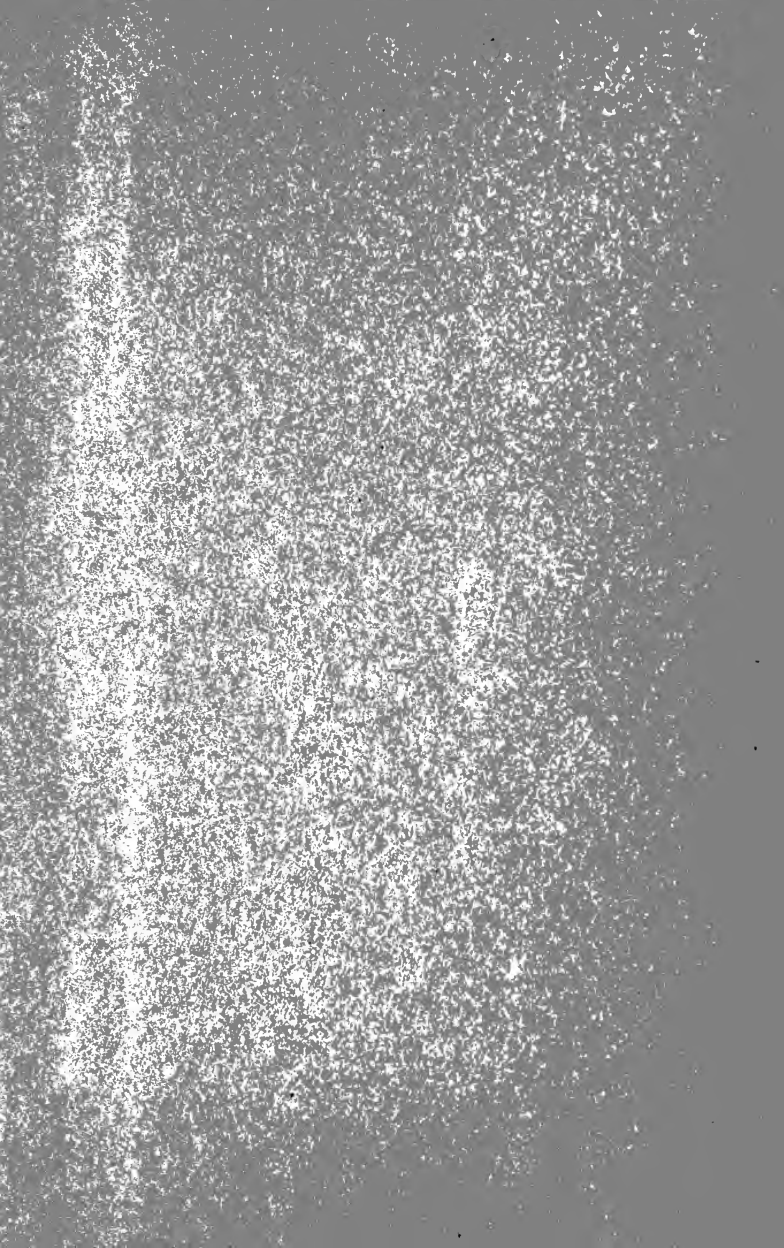
peace rather than of war. His shield is by his side, as a support for his left hand. From beneath his crown, long flowing locks of hair fall on each side of his noble countenance, majestic in its gentleness and strength. His face is bearded, as was common among the best type of Saxons. The King's robes are thrown back, showing his short belted tunic and leather leggings, fastened with thongs below the knees. His whole attitude is dignified and kingly.

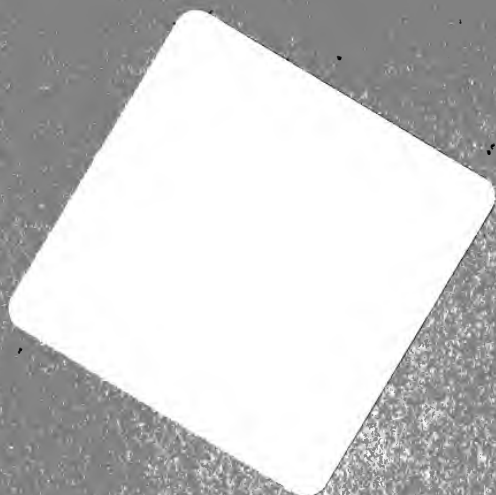
The great statue stands as an emblem of the fact that the heroic King still lives in the hearts of the English people, who owe him so much. The homage paid to his memory on the occasion of his millenary celebration by representatives from nearly every part of the civilized world is proof that Alfred of Wessex yet holds his place as one of the greatest figures in history.













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